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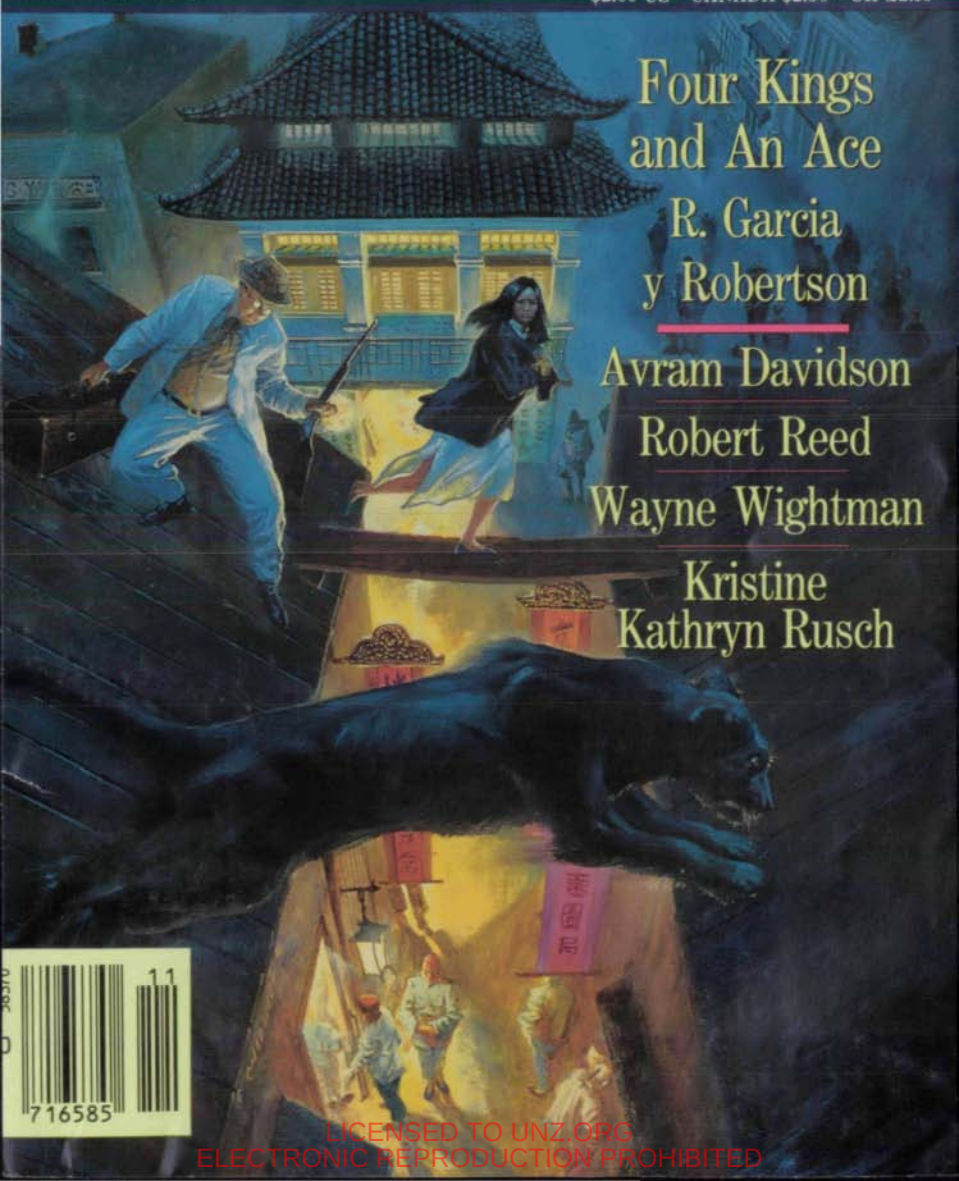

Four Kings and An Ace
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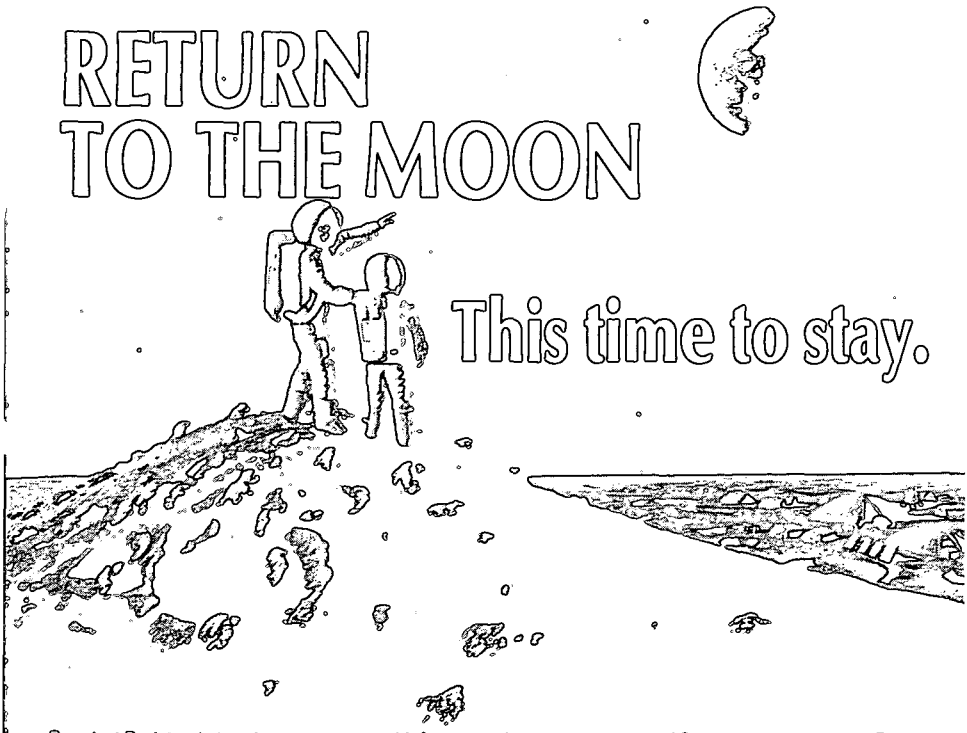

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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NOVEMBER • 42nd Year of Publication

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R. Garcia y Robertson ("The Spiral Dance," May 1990) returns with a colorful and compelling tale set in a mythical San Francisco sometime between the Gold Rush and the Great Quake. It concerns Boy Toy, a young Chinese girl who passes through the Golden Gate only to be thrust into a series of perilous adventures.

FOUR KINGS AND AN ACE

By R. Garcia Y Robertson

"They are a harmless race when white men leave them alone or treat them no worse than dogs. . . A disorderly Chinaman is rare, and a lazy one does not exist."
— Mark Twain

The Golden Gate

EIGHTY DAYS OUT OF Hong Kong, carrying coolies and opium, the clipper *City of Canton* sailed through the Golden Gate. Leaning hard against the starboard rail Boy Toy saw yellow Marin hills part onto a great blue bay. Her black hair framed a pure, youthful face, full of joy at seeing her new homeland after waiting so long and coming so far. Boy Toy happiness had an appealing innocence, not a child's innocence — though she was barely

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15 — but the studious, educated innocence of a girl who knew nothing of men, of money, or the world, nothing but what she had read in books. It was the innocence of a young woman who knew only the love of the parents she had lost in Old China.

Standing at the starboard rail, she could see the city on the hill, the city that the coolies below decks called Gum San Ta Fow — Big City in the Land of the Golden Hills. Boy Toy knew its true name, San Francisco, California — a strange name, neither Cantonese nor English. To her San Francisco looked like a city half finished, sprawling over the hills, fraying at the edges into tents and shanty towns, not standing four square with the world the way a Chinese city would. Sand lots and barren hillsides gaped between rows of rooftops, as though huge hands had flattened buildings to make room for more construction. This strangeness did not bother Boy Toy because she knew the city was built by free men. Just to feel free pavement beneath her silken slippers would be a miracle.

Whistles cut the air. Bare feet thundered over oak planking, and Boy Toy watched sunburnt bodies swarm into the rigging, filling the yards with men. She marveled that the men stood motionless, making no attempt to slow the hurtling ship. Black arched bow foaming straight for the shore, the *City of Canton* careened under a mountain of white canvas toward an anchorage dotted with square riggers, coastal steamers, and fishing smacks.

Boy Toy heard the stern anchor drop, dragging its rattling chain. She stood on tiptoes seeing the crew madly pull in sail. By the time she heard the bow anchor splash into the bay, every spar was bare, every sail was furled from spanker to flying jib. The crew had taken in almost an acre of canvas before the speeding ship ran the length of her stern chain. Few crews could come flying into harbor like the *City of Canton* could. Few clippers could claim twenty years on the China run.

To Boy Toy the crew's easy competence was merely another wonder, assuring her she was really coming to America. In Old China no one worked like that. Free white men leaped about like monkeys, answering shouts and whistles. Straw-hatted peasants tilled the soil and coolies sweated in the ditches, but white men and Mandarins rode in rickshaws and palankeens, cursing the half-naked laborers clogging their path. The wind that carried Boy Toy across the Pacific had changed all that.

Before Boy Toy could walk the streets of Gum San Ta Fow she had to

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crowd into the customs house with the coolies off the *City of Canton*. She was impressed and pleased that such an important building should be a shabby clapboard structure, with no formal garden, no walled antecourt, not even a simple spirit screen. Young men speaking country Cantonese stood in long lines with tired pale faces, pig-tail queues, and dirty blue blouses — strong backs with overwilling hands, smelling of sweat, opium, and bilge water. Boy Toy was delighted, smelling democracy in the coolie's fish oil breath, seeing justice in the simple architecture of the hall and in the lines moving slowly toward wooden desks. Crude honesty was everywhere. No Manchu court or customs hall would look so poor, nor proceed without formal kow-towing and favoritism. In Old China every pompous court official demanded his due, and nothing got done.

She waited until the end to take her turn. Be pleasant, be polite, she thought, these are my people now. Nothing stood between Boy Toy and freedom but a lean man sitting at a big desk and wearing a blue frock coat, opened at the throat to show off his dirty shirt and sweaty chest. Though he had an important post, he seemed not to have bathed or shaved so far this week. He asked for her papers in pathetic Cantonese.

Trembling with pleasure, she replied in gentle and precise English. "Dear sir, here is my letter of introduction from the American Missionary Society." She used English to save this funny sweating man from trying to conduct his business in Cantonese, which he clearly could not speak.

"Damn." The man sat up in his seat as though the post beside him had spoken. "I never heard a sing-song girl speak such good American." Bloodshot eyes looked her over, lingering on the slit in her white *chengosams*.

"I was taught by my foster parents, Minister and Mrs. Jonathan Clay. It is all in the letter." She pointed to the document, politely directing his gaze away from her hips.

He glared, as if a talking China Girl was not all to the good. "*The City of Canton* was not supposed to be carrying joy girls, not even talking ones."

"Joyful girls?" She smiled at the funny man. How could she be anything but joyful, now that she was in America?

"Sure joy girls — sing-song girls, pay-per-day girls — appears your English is not as good as you say." He looked down at the paper. "Are you really fifteen?"

Boy Toy nodded. The feeling of adventure faded; she felt less like

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talking, more like getting past this big sweaty obstacle. He pushed her letter back across the desk. "Says here the Clays are conveniently dead."

It felt like the fool in a frock coat had leaned forward and slapped her. Her parents had been dead less than a year, and she wore only the pure white of mourning. The man settled back, enjoying her discomfort. "You could hardly fool me. I have seen every sort of false paper and forgery used to get China Girls into the country, but this has to be the thinnest. With your English you could just claim re-entry."

Boy Toy stared at him, wondering why he looked for lies, why he preferred falsehood from her. "No need to look surly," he added. "I am letting you in. Hell, I enjoy a quick and clever China Girl as much as any man might. Just don't think you are tricking me, and remember what I have done for you if we meet in a *bagnio*." He said this with bored hopefulness, as if he knew not to look for gratitude from girls like her.

Humiliated, Boy Toy hurried through the door he indicated, and her heart fell when it did not lead to the street. Instead she found herself in a small cubicle containing a grinning older man, who claimed to be a doctor and did an inane pantomime to indicate she should undress. "Doctor, doctor," he thumped his chest like an asthmatic having an attack. "You takee clothes off, pleez."

Boy Toy wanted to flee, but the door behind her led back into the customs hall. She started to speak, then thought better. Do not anger him; this man has the power to keep you out of the Land of Golden Hills. Trapped and crushed, she undid her *chengosams*.

The old fellow grinned and bobbed his head, absurdly happy to be understood. Staring at the wooden planks between her feet, she neatly folded her silk *chengosams*. Blouse and pants followed. She looked past her bare belly at her nude legs and splayed toes, while the man poked and felt her, enjoying his job, saying crude things about her private parts as if she could not hear him.

Then he stuck her with a needle, saying this would cost her "ten-dolla," rubbing the red spot he made on her smooth thigh. "Can savee money," he said. "Just bend down and makee me happy man." Spraying spittle as he spoke, the doctor pantomimed pulling down his pants. Hiding behind her newfound ignorance, Boy Toy pretended not to understand. He gave up and let her dress, taking her money instead.

Dulled with shame, passed from scum to scum, Boy Toy stepped out

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onto the free streets of San Francisco. Sunlight spilled over the Embarcadero. Blinking back tears she saw the waterfront was crowded with yelling men. Coolies cowered under the eaves of the customs house, holding up their hands to protect their heads, while a knot of white men in a nearby sand lot threw stones and garbage at the Chinese. They hurled insults, too, but not in clear or correct English. Boy Toy could barely make out the shouts of "Ho-war, Ho-war," directed at her.

America was not what she had expected. Old China had been bad, even evil sometimes, but at least it made sense. San Francisco was a madhouse, a big barbarian asylum with the inmates running wild. A stone grazed her cheek. Clods splattered her white silks.

Four men pushed forward, appearing from nowhere, putting themselves between her and the mob. It was like in an old story when four guardians step straight down from heaven. Boy Toy did not know who they were, but they moved light and quick, like boxers, wearing plain blue pants and padded jackets. She was just grateful to be shielded. Their leader was a moon-faced fellow with big hands and a broken nose. He said something in country Cantonese, and the living box started up the street, away from the docks and customs house. Boy Toy moved quickly to keep up with the magic box.

A big man with sunburnt arms and a brick in his hand tried to block their way, squinting and shifting from side to side, glancing to see if his cronies would back his play. The lead boxer walked right up to him, folded his hands into his padded sleeves and bowed, saying in polite but common Cantonese, "Please step aside Stupid White Devil."

The big man hefted his brick and looked over his shoulder. None of his fellow heroes were stepping forward. The barbarian towered over Boy Toy's protector, but she could see he was afraid. Stammering a curse, the man stepped aside, letting the moving box march past. Boy Toy could barely believe it. The broken-nosed boxer had spoken like a clod with dung between his toes, insulting a white man, but the white man backed down as easily as a coolie being ordered about. She had seen stark fear in the red-faced devil's watery eyes.

She studied the boxer's flat basic features. His only hint of refinement was in his walk, which had the balanced effortless grace of a man schooled in the martial arts. She had seen such men in China, unstoppable assassins who walked up walls and across water, able to kill with a stick,

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a length of chain, or the flat of the hand. No wonder the barbarian with a brick had backed down. She hesitated, then asked, "Are you Triads?"

The boxer's hard face softened. He smiled and nodded to her. "We are Hip Yee Tong. Your speech is like music."

Boy Toy lowered her eyes, modestly ending their conversation. Hip Yee Tong meant Hall of United Justice. These were Triads, from the secret Society of Heaven and Earth, enemies of the Manchus, warriors from the New China. She could hardly be in better hands.

Straight and proud they marched into a dirty, smelly city swarming with people, mostly men, of all colors and races: brown *Californios*, red-shirted miners, blanketed Indians, and hard-looking sharpies wearing silk hats and Colt revolvers. Spanish ladies in creamy lace shared the sidewalks with tobacco-spitting bullwackers carrying black coiled whips. Buildings opened straight onto the street, and only the red-roofed adobes were turned inward the way a proper house should be. Passing a green park they climbed a hill where she could see the full sweep of the city and the glittering blue bay. Cable cars clattered and swayed, moving uphill by some mysterious means. A strange new world indeed.

Turning off Clay Street onto Dupont Gai, they plunged into a different city, one more familiar to Boy Toy. Here the very air was different, denser, sopium and open privies. The men thronging around her were Chinese, wearing smelling of incense, fish, heavy spices, blue blouses, baggy pants, and black braided queues. Dupont Gai, old Dupont Street, ran right through a truly Chinese city, with people piled on top of people and not a hand's span of space wasted. All along the east side of the street, banners and wall posters proclaimed in bold characters "Temple of Luck and Prosperity," or "Pipes and Lamps always Lit."

Despite the privies and opium dens, despite the Temples of Luck, Boy Toy did not doubt that this was the New China, without Manchus or Mandarins. Here the secret brotherhoods operated in the open, protecting the weak, fearing not even white villains in a white city. She saw no hordes of beggars, just men working — men's voices, men's faces. Where were the women in the new China?

They turned, descending stone steps, and entering a dark tunnel through a doorway framed with heavy timbers. Light dimmed, and for a moment Boy Toy was blinded, but ahead she heard women's voices. She followed that sound, rounding a carved spirit screen and entering a cav-

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ernous underground room lit by paper lanterns. The closed-in air was sweetened with incense. Walls were windowless, painted in bright colors, half hidden by lacquered panelling. Young women sat on graying redwood benches, facing a bird-thin old woman who was holding up a small coin.

"Two-bits," the young women said in unison.

Boy Toy stood watching without speaking. The crone held up two coins together. "Fifty cents," said the young women.

She held up a greenback bill.

"One dollar."

Useful information no doubt, but Boy Toy was already familiar with the Almighty Dollar. She grew bored and looked about. Her four protectors had vanished, going like ghosts, but she seemed safe enough; the heavy door behind her was barred and she was surrounded by solid cement walls. Besides the crone and her pupils, Boy Toy saw only a rouged white woman with puffy eyes, sitting in a corner.

The crone help up two bills.

"One lay," said the women.

Boy Toy's head snapped around. She stared at the lesson. Seeming pleased by the answers the crone put down the money and said in passable Cantonese, "Come, you must learn too."

"I do not need lessons.' Boy Toy rattled off, "Two-bits, twenty-five cents; four-bits, fifty cents; one dollar, a hundred cents." She ignored the last part of the lesson which had sounded vulgar and unchristian.

The flood of flawless English startled everyone. Pupils giggled over the old lady's surprise. The lone white woman in the corner got up and came over to Boy Toy. "Who are you?" Boy Toy saw lively curiosity in the woman's puffy eyes.

"My name is Boy Toy."

"How come I never heard of you?"

Boy Toy said she had been in San Francisco less than an hour, and was not at all famous. Every word out of her lips amazed the white woman even more. She turned to the crone, "Hell, do the Hip Yees know what they got here?"

The bird-like woman rocked her head, suspicious that her routine might be broken. "Listen to her talk," insisted the white woman. "If she don't bring 3,000 dollars then screw me with a goddamned eggroll."

Nothing made sense to Boy Toy. "Three thousand dollars for what?"

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"For you," said the white woman, "for a pretty young sing-song girl who speaks so well."

"No," said Boy Toy, "I did not come to San Francisco to sing. I came to learn missionary work."

The crone seized on a word she understood. "Missionaries are devils. They beat girls and do not let them see men, making them learn the Lord's Prayer instead." The white woman waved the crone off, sitting Boy Toy down on a bench, saying in a motherly way, "My name is Mollie Maguire. You must tell me where you learned to talk like that."

Boy Toy told her, relieved to meet someone not just amazed by her words, but actually willing to listen. "I was raised by Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan Clay, American missionaries. As a child I never thought of them as anything but mother and father, never thought of myself as anything but American; only slowly did I discover that I was Chinese too. My Chinese family must have been murdered by Manchu troops, so many villages were destroyed that way. My American parents died last year, and I was doubly an orphan, without parents and without a homeland. Missionaries in Canton raised enough money to pay my passage home." Boy Toy did not describe the horrible treatment at the customs house. Why burden this nice woman with that ugly story? Instead she asked, "Where am I now?"

"This is called the Queen's Room. Every China Girl who comes to San Francisco comes here." Mollie moved closer and took her hand. "I know what you are feeling. Long, long ago I came to America with my head full of foolish notions."

"You came to be a missionary." Boy Toy brightened.

"Well no," Mollie shook her head. "I wanted to be a Fenian, to fight the British, burn the bastards out of Canada, but that's a lot like being a missionary."

Boy Toy said nothing, but to her the two ambitions sounded very different. Mollie gave her a sorry smile. "There are a lot of things you cannot understand, having never been to County Cork. That's not important now. Look, you are not going to be a missionary. The only missionary work you are going to learn is how to screw on your back with your legs spread and eyes fixed on heaven."

Boy Toy looked aghast. "What you say is obscene. The Triads will protect me."

"The Triads?"

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"The men who brought me here."

"Those were highbinders," said Mollie.

"Highbinders?"

"Yes, hoodlums, *boo how doy*, Hip Yee hatchet men. They go down to the boats to get girls."

"Not so, the secret brotherhood in China teach men to drink pure and clear water, not the wine of brothels."

"Well, that may be the way it is in China, but here in San Francisco the Hip Yees drink like salmon and screw like the Irish. You will get no help from them."

Boy Toy sat down, feeling the solid strength of the windowless walls and barred door. "This is not possible. Here in America we have democracy."

"Hell, Honey," said the Irish woman, "this ain't America, this is San Francisco. Sure they close the bars on election day, and let Bog Irish vote, but there is no democracy for China Girls. The only democracy working girls see is in the *bagnios*, since men are pretty near equal with their pants down — not more than a few inches difference anyways."

Boy Toy closed her mouth tight, no longer liking to speak English when the conversation was becoming so unchristian. Mollie tried to explain that this was the wrong attitude. "Look, you have an appealing innocence, which makes a man want to protect you. Makes him want to take you somewhere private and screw you good and solid, but treat you right afterwards. You need to use that innocence."

Boy Toy would not speak. She sat silently winding up her will. She would not be a whore nor a concubine; she would not be used in an unchristian way. They could not make her. They could lock her underground, they could starve her and beat her, but in the end they would have to kill her. She would join her parents as pure as the white silk *chengosams* she was wearing. She sat wishing she had never left Canton, where the silver mist off the Pearl River rises over a landscape shimmering in seven shades of green. Why had she believed her father's fables about America?

Mollie gave up and left, grumbling that it was impossible to help the Chinese.

Boy Toy sat alone, dully listening to the crone's lessons. She heard the girls repeat handy phrases like "pleez-pey-furst" and "no-brass-nuggets," while the crone described all manner of unmentionable ways to "pleez"

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a man. Cackling with delight, she explored every possible penetration of female orifices by the aroused male member. Between each gross anatomy lesson, she sprinkled bits of wisdom, "Look for the ugly ones. Ugly men are good as gold. They only want to feel handsome by putting their turtle heads into a woman. Handsome men look good, but want more. They want what their wives and sweethearts will not give them."

Boy Toy felt herself going crazy with fear. She tried to think of the strength of women, the strength of nature that is mother to us all. She prayed for the yielding consistency of a stream that wears down the largest boulder into a tiny pebble, for the strength of water which bursts concrete walls. Her mother had told her a Chinese story that was very Christian. Kwan Yin, the Earth Mother, had taken the form of a young girl. Because she would not give herself Kwan Yin was executed, her body tied to a tiger, and her pure spirit descended to the Land of the Dead. Like Boy Toy she was locked underground, threatened with shame and torment, but Kwan Yin did not give in. When the King of the Dead could no longer stomach her purity, he cast her back among the living. So it will be with me, she decided. I will stay pure, even if I am dragged down to the Land of the Dead.

The *barracoon* began to fill with men in silk jackets and black caps; fat happy men, their shining faces studying the women with professional disinterest. Other girls dropped their gaze, but Boy Toy looked boldly back at them, saying with her eyes that they could not break her.

She saw Mollie push through the crowd, with two white men behind her. One was tall and thin with a high forehead, long straight nose, and small black mustache. He wore a silk waistcoat and carried a silver knobbed ebony cane. His companion was small and shabby, baldheaded, wearing a gray suit and official looking badge.

Mollie knelt beside Boy Toy. "Look, I have come to help you, Honey. Show these men your letter. Tell them your story."

The tall man looked dignified, and the shabby man was some sort of official, but Boy Toy trusted no one now; least of all Mollie, who wanted her to become a prostitute. She said nothing, meeting their gaze with silent resistance. Mollie begged her, pointing to the other men in silk robes and happy coats. "These are buyers for the *bagnios:* Yat Sing from Yreka, Yep Shung from Rough and Ready, Hing Yo from down south. If you clam up and play dumb some fool will buy you for a few hundred

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bucks. He'll stick you in a closet-sized crib, letting men screw you for a couple of dollars apiece, dollar-fifty a prick for parties. I will tell you that girls die from that." She pointed out a man with a pockmarked face. "That is the doctor who checks girls for disease. You get too sick to work and he will turn you out to starve, or strangle you with that cord around his waist."

Boy Toy looked at the pockmarked man, with his red silk cord and cold, uncaring eyes, like fish eyes. She reached into her sleeve and pulled out her letter of introduction, handing it to the tall stranger. "My name is Boy Toy. I am the adopted daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan Clay, of Akron, Ohio, American missionaries to China."

Mollie beamed at the men, "Didn't I tell you the girl could talk?"

The tall thin man took her letter and looked it over. "Indeed she can. I am pleased to meet you, Miss Boy Toy. My name is Stanley Lealand." He turned to the stubby little man. "Ned, this is an amazing story. Did you ever hear the like?"

Ned shook his head and said nothing. His jaws were working, but he appeared to be chewing a cud. Lealand apologized for his friend's silence. "Ned here is struck speechless. Ned Bailey is with the Chinatown Police, and he surely never saw a China Girl who held her head so high." Lealand's eyes twinkled. "I bet you even show your teeth when you smile."

Boy Toy smiled, shaking with relief.

Lealand turned back to Ned. "Buy her," he said, "no matter what she costs."

Stunned, she watched Lealand spin about and stride off, taking her letter with him. Mollie's arm was around her middle. "See how easy that was? No *bagnio* crib for you, Boy Toy. Mister Lealand owns the best sporting house on the coast; got a grand piano, feather beds, Italian paintings, silk sheets and satin swings. Can't ask for better coming right off the boat."

"He has my letter," Boy Toy struggled to her feet.

Ned spit a big wad of tobacco onto the spotless floor. "He will have more of you than that, or I miss my guess." He called to the crone, "Get the bidding going. Mister Lealand has made his choice."

Everyone crowded around to see what the white men were bidding on. The crone commanded Boy Toy to be silent, threatening her in Cantonese with dire and shameful punishments. The other buyers wanted her

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stripped. A rich fool might bid on a sealed package, but they were men of business.

"No," said Boy Toy. Mollie took her hand. "Look, in this business you have to get used to taking your clothes off; it's like getting dressed for work." The crone told her that her clothes would be ripped off, and she would get a beating on the soles of her feet where it would not show. She added she had never seen a girl so ungrateful.

Completely betrayed, Boy Toy undressed to save her *chengosams.* Again she stood shamed and naked, though what had happened in the customs house was a pleasantry compared to standing naked in this circle of men, knowing worse was coming. She hated their fish-like faces and gaping mouths, and wanted to drive her nails into their glassy eyes. Yep Shung from Rough and Ready began the bidding at $1,000.

The policeman called Ned's bid, "$1,500. What do you want her for, Yep Shung? Up in the Sierras they will screw anything prettier than a she-mule." Yep Shung bowed politely, dropping out when the bidding passed $2,000.

Naked and alone, thinking of the water and the rock, Boy Toy listened to the bids mount. In the end there was only Ned Bailey and a man from Los Angeles named Hing Yo. She thought about what the crone had said. For a white man Stanley Lealand was handsome, and she feared what he would do to her to get his money's worth. Already he seemed like the King of the Dead.

Ned outbid Hing Yo, and Boy Toy was bought for $3,700. Ned said in a good-natured way that white men had been cheated again. "You Celestial bastards alway overbid to drive the price up. Draw up her contract and deliver her to Mister Lealand." The crone replied that her price honored everyone; Boy Toy, the Hip Yee Tong, and Mister Lealand most of all. Ned gave them a last look at Lealand's purchase, then let her dress.

Mollie and the crone led Boy Toy to a little room, thick with joss smoke. The crone fingered Boy Toy's *chengosams,* saying, "So gloomy. Men do not like to see so much white." She handed Boy Toy a black jacket. "Here, wear something cheery." Boy Toy pulled on the oversized jacket, huddling inside its padding. The crone slipped a paper covered with characters into the jacket pocket. "This is your contract."

Boy Toy did not even glance at the document. Stanley Lealand wanted $3,700 dollars worth of use from her, and she did not want to know how he would get his money's worth.

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The boxers who brought her came to take her away. Back in the moving box, she felt trapped, knowing they were taking her not to the New China, but to King of the Dead. Already her life felt finished. She was surprised to see that it was night outside. She had spent almost the whole day underground. Dragon tail banners hung limp over wet dark streets shrouded in fog and woodsmoke. Paper lanterns lit bits of pavement, splashing brick walls with yellow pools of light. Passing curtained windows Boy Toy could feel the warmth of taverns, joss houses, and gambling dens, all smelling of incense or opium.

She studied the boxer who was leading them, since he seemed her only hope. Speaking slowly and softly she said, "You must not do this."

The man's head snapped about, but he did not stop walking. She attempted to stop and the moving box jostled her along from one lantern pool to the next. "You know this is not honorable. You must not make me go. There is no place for slavery in the New China."

"You must be silent," said the boxer. "We must accept. It is not for us to judge." His voice was not harsh, just firm. Boy Toy could see the sort of man he was, a bright unsheathed blade that cut without questioning.

From up the street Boy Toy heard a tapping, a gentle rapping that grew louder as they advanced, like hardwood hitting the pavement. The boxer stopped speaking. Boy Toy saw his walk slow, his body loosen, and his hands slip into his sleeves.

In the next circle of light stood a man and a woman. The man was not Chinese, and built like a busted barrel with his belly hanging over his belt. He wore a baggy white suit and a frayed straw hat tipped back over a pitted, craggy face. A skinny little cigar was clamped between his teeth. One elbow rested on an upturned suitcase, and the other hand held an ax handle. He was absently tapping the ax handle against the brick pavement.

The woman beside him was even stranger still. She was older than the man and had black skin, a black dress, and a black kerchief binding her hair. Her eyes had large whites, deepset and staring. A feeling of casual power hung over both of them.

The moving box halted. The stranger brought his ax handle up, holding tight to the slim curved wood, resting the business end lightly on his palm. He wore tiny glass spectacles, and Boy Toy watched them turn from her to the lead boxer. "Hello, Mau Yee." He spoke in the flat, benign voice of a country preacher on a social call. "Yer gonna have to give up the girl."

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The Hip Yee boxer did not speak, but shook his head, keeping his hands in his sleeves.

"Mau Yee," the man drew the name out, "I admire a man who works hard for his bowl of rice, but you are going to have to give her up. There is no way around it."

The Hip Yee's hand came flying out of his sleeve. His whole body extended, sending something bright and metallic spinning through the lamplight toward the stranger, whirring as it went.

The fat man's ax handle came up, protecting his face. He pivoted from the hips, swinging the big bat as though the wood were an extension of his hands. The whirling object hit the ax handle, wrapping around it, clawing the air like a living thing. Boy Toy could see it was three lengths of chain weighted with spiked balls, forming a wicked steel bolo. Grasping the thick end of the ax handle the big man flicked it free of the chain, sending Mau Yee's glittering weapon spinning off into the darkness to clatter against a wall.

The black woman stepped forward. Keening in a strange tongue, she raised an object over her head and shattered it on the pavement at their feet. Yellow smoke billowed in the lamplight, spreading slowly outward, carrying a heady overpowering odor. The air tingled and Boy Toy's head swam. As the smoke continued to spread the black woman seemed to dissolve into it. There was a screech like a hundred cats mating, and a black cat the size of a horse sprang out of the choking smoke. The huge apparition had eyes like yellow fire, and snarled as it stalked toward them, moving with the smoke.

Boy Toy stood rooted, not daring to look away. At either hand she heard the fast scuffle of retreating feet, as three of the Tongs turned and ran. Only Mau Yee stood his ground. Reaching into his jacket he drew out a steel hatchet with a stubby handle.

The fat man and the cat advanced together. Mau Yee sprang, holding his hatchet sideways, blade forward. The white man took a swipe at him with his ax handle. Turning sideways in midair the boxer let the ax handle slide by him, then he brought his feet down sharply, catching the wood against the pavement. With a sharp report the ax handle shattered.

The big cat snarled, tensing as if to spring. Smoke streamed from the beast, making her seem afire. Mau Yee turned again, trying to keep between the feline monster and Boy Toy.

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The white man tossed away his broken weapon. His hand went inside his coat, and came out holding a sawed-off shotgun. Two gaping barrels less than a foot long pointed right at the boxer's middle. "Mau Yee," he said slowly. "We are making this fight more serious than it needs to be. You cannot get her away without killing me. We know what will happen if you kill a white man in front of witnesses. The whole Hip Yee Tong will suffer. The Irish will come in and bust up your joss houses, burn down your Jackson Street restaurant. Maybe hang a few Hip Yees. It won't matter to them who's right, or that you were just doing business."

The cat started to circle. As the panther edged behind him, Mau Yee had to move sideways to see both ways at once. The stifling yellow smoke filled the whole street. Stepping toward Boy Toy, the white man with the shotgun clamped his free hand about her wrist. "I hear you speak English."

Scared by the ghost cat and the man's gun, Boy Toy merely nodded.

"Well, thank goodness for that," said the fat man. "So come with me, unless you want to see a Hip Yee blown in half. That is not a pretty sight, even in poor light."

Boy Toy said she would go. What could be worse than being taken to the King of the Dead? Backing away from Mau Yee, the white man shouldered his suitcase and propelled Boy Toy up the empty street. She ran, and he pushed, with the yellow-eyed panther padding after them. As the man steered her around a corner into a narrow alley, the highbinder's hatchet whizzed between them, cartwheeling through the night and fog.

"The Chinaman is a great convenience to everybody — even to worst class of white men, for he bears the most of their sins, suffering fines for their petty thefts, imprisonment for their robberies, and death for their murders."
— Mark Twain

The Monterey Spur

THE BIG man and the huge black cat sped Boy Toy down the dark alley, then up a flight of rickety wooden stairs and onto a flat roof. There she could make out the lights of Dupont Gai threading through the fog of Chinatown. Crossing the roof-top they came to a second building, flush against the first, but half a story higher.

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The cat leaped to the second rooftop in a single fluid motion. Boy Toy felt the man grasp her waist and hoist her overhead. There was no time to feel alarmed. His gnarled hands were strong and steady, and his fat body felt as solid as a sack of iron. His suitcase landed on the roof beside her, and a moment later he was there too, shouldering the suitcase and telling her to hustle.

Scrambling through the night, she followed the cat as best she could. A black crevass separated this roof from the next. The cap leaped lightly over the yawning gap, and the man herded Boy Toy across a narrow plank. On the other side he turned to dispose of the bridge. Boy Toy paused, watching him tuck the plank behind an abutment. Without looking, the man growled, "Get going, girl. Got bound feet, or something?"

She hurried after the cat. Crossing to another building they descended a firestair on the far side. The cat ducked into a dark curtained window, and here Boy Toy balked. The room within was a black pit. Below she could see Stockton Street and the lights of the American city beyond. Dupont Gai was blocks away. They had crossed half of Chinatown without once touching the ground.

The man came down the firestair behind Boy Toy, chiding her and helping her through the window. He came in after her, his big form blotting out the street lights. Boy Toy felt the man's suitcase thump down beside her, and she heard his labored breathing in the dark. Fumbling, he muttered something about, "Damned Locofocos," and struck a light. Blinded by the flaring match, Boy Toy could see nothing until the man managed to light an oil lamp and set it on an upturned crate. She was in a small spare room, with a single door opposite the window and no furniture except for a few packing crates and a small cast iron stove. There was no sign of the giant cat. Slumped in one corner was a gaunt dark-skinned man with a mass of kinked hair falling in great tangled curls to his shoulders. He wore a torn shirt and canvas pants, and sat on a frayed Navaho blanket. Another Navaho blanket was wrapped around his skinny shoulders.

By the light of the lamp the fat man looked more than ever like he had fallen in a ditch and let his suit dry on him. Without looking at Boy Toy he said, "My name is Aaron Maria Spinoza. The fellow who was sitting in the dark is King Ahab. King Ahab, this is Boy Toy."

"Was not sitting in the dark," said the man in the corner. "King Ahab

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was sleeping until Mama Love came banging through the window. You wasn't too quiet neither."

"Where is the cat?" The big cat was the only thing Boy Toy could think about. It was the most astonishing thing she had ever seen; frightening yet protective, very otherworldly. "I saw it come in the window."

"King Ahab, you see a cat?" The man who called himself Aaron Maria knelt down, flicking the latches on his suitcase.

"Me see only Mama Love." King Ahab adjusted his blankets.

Boy Toy was too drained to argue. She had seen the cat, so had the three highbinders who took to their heels. She watched the fat man pull a long gun out of his suitcase. "What is that for?"

"Distance work." Aaron broke open the trapdoor breech and inserted a shell. "Springfield 45-55 carbine, the best rifle for under 500 yards." He snapped the breech shut. "Some swear by magazine rifles, more shots and all, but I never seen a magazine gun good at any distance. Hit the first time and you don't need extra shots." He laid the Springfield down on the floor next to his sawed-off shotgun, a 10-gauge Whitney. "A Springfield will jam on you, but if you stick to the 55 grain factory loads you'll have no problem with a cold piece."

Boy Toy could see a Colt Lightning revolver and a two-foot Bowie knife strapped to the interior of the battered suitcase, which contained a shoulder holster and numerous boxes of cartridges. "Do you always go around armed like this?"

"Only when I am working, Mam." He removed the stubby revolver from the suitcase, pushed it through his belt, then leaned back against the packing crate that supported the lamp.

"Who are you working for?" Boy Toy stared at the small arsenal Aaron was keeping in reach.

"I am a Range Detective and an authorized agent of the Carmel Valley-Watsonville Grange. In San Francisco on business, more or less legitimate, so you need not worry."

She sighed and sat down. By now so much had happened that Boy Toy was beyond worrying.

Aaron took some oily paper out of his pocket. Wrapped inside were a dozen cold corn tortillas. He bit into one and gave another to Boy Toy. "So tell me about your day. We have most of the night to talk."

Dazed and hungry she bit into the tortilla and started to describe her

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day, beginning with the crowd of strangers at the dock who threw garbage on her, skipping over the degrading "medical" examination.

"Bog Irish," said Aaron, taking a light view of her troubles. "Shouldn't let them bother you. They just ain't got the sense to see where their interests are. They are afraid that coolies are going to take their jobs away. If they stopped to consider, half of them would discover they did not have jobs. Besides, can you picture an Irishman doing laundry? Who would bring their cleaning to a man who never washed his shirt?"

She told him about the Triads who took her to the Queen's Room.

"Hip Yees," he said. "They meet every boat to grab girls and sell them as prostitutes. I cannot say I like it, but it is their rice bowl."

King Ahab asked, "Do you have any paper?"

Aaron stuck one paw into his pocket and pulled out two thin pieces of paper covered with characters. He gave them a puzzled glance peering over his glasses, then turned to Boy Toy. "Do you read, girl?"

"Only English, French, and Chinese."

"Here, take these." He handed her the papers. "One is yours. The other is the laundry ticket for my suit. Give the ticket to King Ahab."

Boy Toy separated the papers and passed the laundry ticket to King Ahab, staring at the other document. "This is my contract. How did you get it?"

"Took it out of your jacket when I lifted you up to that roof. Thought it might be important, and in the dark I did not know it was Chinese."

King Ahab sprinkled the laundry ticket with some crushed leaves, shaking his head. "She reads chicken scratches?"

"Didn't you hear the lady? She knows American, French and Chinese. She is a goddamn China Girl genius." Reaching into his pocket he took out a five-tael tin of opium and passed it to King Ahab. "Sprinkle some of this in the mix, makes the hemp burn sweeter."

"This is horrible," said Boy Toy softly, reading through her contract. It did not seem as dangerous now, but it was coldly nauseating to see her name in a vipers pit of lies. "It says I was paid $3,700. And I must work twelve years to pay it back. For every week I am sick they add a month. Can this possibly be enforceable in court?" It seemed that everything her father had said about America was a carefully constructed falsehood.

Aaron was watching King Ahab roll the hemp and opium into the rice paper laundry ticket. "Nothing in Chinese is enforceable in American courts.

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The Hip Yees have their own courts and you may bet they mean to enforce that contract. If they find out where you are they will come after you with hatchets, highbinders, and writs of *habeas corpus*. Maybe some spooks too. Hip Yee are not above using Hoodoo and the law to have their way."

"Spooks?"

"Ghosts, ghoulies, and things that go bump in the night." He said it so blandly that Boy Toy could not tell if he were serious. It could have been anything from a dire warning to a sour joke. She kept staring back at her contract. "Such slavery must be illegal?"

"So it is," said Aaron. "As is stock jobbing, rate fixing, and railway fraud; but you won't see anybody sitting in jail for it." He turned to King Ahab. "Here let me ignite that." King Ahab handed him the rolled up laundry ticket, packed with hemp and opium, making a lumpy cigarette the size of a candle. Aaron reached over his head without looking, lighting it off the lamp. The paper sputtered and sparked, then began to burn. Aaron put the unlit end to his lips, and took a deep drag. Holding his breath he handed the lit ticket back to King Ahab.

Exhaling a cloud of smoke he said, "Not bad," looking at Boy Toy. "Wild hemp, *Cannabis sativa*, a harsh smoke, but it has a fair kick, and is a boon to those who cannot afford tobacco. The Holy Fathers brought hemp with them; now it grows in the ditches. The Lord works in mysterious ways."

"Blessed be the name of the Lord," said King Ahab as he inhaled. Adding, "Not bad for Babylon, but cannot compare to Jamaican."

"Sure," sighed Aaron, "everything better in Jamaica; the hemp, the rum, the women. . . ."

". . . the boys, the music, the sunshine," said King Ahab.

"As well as being a pagan, King Ahab is a sodomite," said Aaron.

"No pagan," said King Ahab, passing back the cigarette. "Just a tender loving child of Ja."

Aaron offered Boy Toy the ticket, but she shook her head politely. "There will be no Opium in the New China."

"This New China sounds as jolly as a presbyterian funeral," said Aaron drawing the smoke into his lungs.

She shook her head over the contract. Lies put so boldy in writing were as unbelievable as that giant cat. "But I never even saw any money."

"You would be hard put proving that. The Hip Yees will have a written contract and twelve highbinders to swear you saw the money, and took it."

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"If the Hip Yees are so powerful, why did you rescue me?"

"We did not take you from the Hip Yees." He held the smoke in, speaking through his teeth. "If you read the fine chicken scratching on that contract, I'm sure you'll see you belong to Golden Gate Trust and Savings. Golden Gate Trust and Savings belongs to a Nevada Senator, name of Stanley Lealand, who you met earlier this evening. The Hip Yees are not pimps, merely middlemen between the *bahngar* who import girls and the brothel owners like Lealand. As I said, that is their rice bowl." He handed the cigarette back to King Ahab.

Boy Toy shook her head. "Yes, I remember Mr. Lealand. I thought he would help me. . . ."

"But he ended up owning you? I have had similar experiences with Stanley Lealand. He is a Nevada Senator, a pimp, and a railroad lawyer; all three professions having much the same qualifications. He is also a saloon keeper, but no man in Nevada is anything unless he is also a saloon keeper."

"Nevada." Boy Toy rolled the name around. "That is another state. We are in California."

"Nevada is not a state, but a big sandlot inhabited by prickly pear cactus and poison belly lizards, and infested with the lowest sort of rowdies in the employ of the Central Pacific. Not even the Mormons want it. Senator Lealand prefers to represent his constituents in the poker parlors and knocking shops of San Francisco. So would I, if I had the money or the drink to buy their votes."

King Ahab cocked his head, listening, then handed the smoking remains of the laundry ticket to Aaron. Reaching behind himself he drew out a set of hardwood sticks and a box drum. Taking the sticks, he began to tap the slotted box lightly, rapping out a simple beat, both soothing and stirring:

Tinka, tinka, tink
Tinka, tonk,
Tinka tonk

Boy Toy pictured the dapper man who had betrayed her. "He took my letter, my proof of adoption." She felt robbed of her family, her hopes for a home.

"Senator Lealand has been the undoing of many young ladies," said Aaron. "He has two notable weaknesses. One is poker, and the other is

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buying Chinese girls straight off the boats, young ones with little tits and big almond eyes. Seems like a harmless hobby, but it gave me the notion you might be useful when Mama Love saw you in her crystal ball."

"Useful?" The word had a chilling effect, since Boy Toy was mortally tired of men finding novel uses for her.

"Yes, I mean to do business with Senator Lealand, and he does not wish to do business with me. Senator Lealand owns women, saloons, real estate; and a railroad, called the Monterey Spur. It is a small railroad, but it is strangling the life out of the fairest valley in California. I represent a group of landowners — from Spanish Grandees to peons and sodbusters —who wish to buy it from him."

"If it is Mr. Lealand's railroad, he does not have to sell." Boy Toy still believed that much of her father's lectures on U.S. political economy.

"Grangers do not see it that way. Mr. Lealand came to our valley preaching the railroad, organizing a syndicate, buying up rights of way, all the while dangling government money in our faces. We all bought shares and signed right of way agreements, but by the time the railroad was built it was bankrupt; then Mr. Lealand foreclosed on us."

The laundry ticket had burned down to a stub. Taking it in two fingers, Aaron drew the last bit of smoke from it, then tossed it aside. "In our innocence it never occurred to us that a railroad could go bankrupt while the money syndicate that backed it turned a handsome profit. We offered to buy our railroad, on time, but Lealand prefers to bleed us with usurious freight rates, so that he may one day own the valley as well as the railroad. I intend to get Senator Lealand to take back his useless stock, and give me the Monterey Spur."

"How?" asked Boy Toy bitterly, "by trading me for the railroad?"

"Now there is a thought." A smile split Aaron's craggy face and he looked her over. "You are a mite thin and underdeveloped, but what man could resist a girl who values herself so highly. At $3,700 I am sure the Hip Yees thought they were well paid, but now it appears you are worth a railroad as well."

Boy Toy studied the man, wondering what he would say next. King Ahab's drum solo grew louder and deeper.

Tonka, Tonka, Tonk
Tinka Tonk
Tinka, Tonk

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"What makes you think he will trade the railroad for a talking China Girl?"

"I have been a number of things in my life," said Aaron, "a farmer, card player, carnival wrestler, a Mason, and now a Range Detective; but I have never yet been in the business of trading in women. It appears to be a chancy occupation; more uncertain even than trading in mules. Besides, Mr. Lealand has turned down an offer of $100,000 for the Monterey Spur. What makes you think he will trade the railroad for a talking China Girl?"

"I hope he won't." Boy Toy remembered Lealand saying to Ned Bailey, "Buy her, no matter what she costs." She shook herself. "I only want to know what use you plan to make of me."

"I am not totally sure," said Aaron. "It is enough now that Stanley Lealand wants you, and we have you."

"We?" She looked from Aaron to King Ahab.

Tonka Tonk
Tonka Tonk
Tonka Tonk

Before Aaron could answer, King Ahab ceased his drumming. "Mama Love is calling," he said softly. Aaron lifted an eyebrow. Boy Toy could hear nothing. King Ahab tilted his head toward the closed door. "Yes indeed. Appears Mama Love wants both of you right now."

Aaron looked vexed. "How come, King Ahab, you are all the time hearing Mama Love when no one else can?"

"It's Ja man, just Ja." He began to beat again.

"Ja." Aaron pushed his bulk upright and offered Boy Toy a huge hand, opening the door. "We should not keep Mama Love waiting."

Boy Toy stood up, hesitating. The big cat had come in through the window ahead of her, and could only have gone out through that door. She was more than a bit frightened, but also curious about the cat. Better to know what was happening, and how she might protect herself in mad, mad America. Besides, it was not her ambition to spend the rest of her life in that room. So she entered the dark doorway in the wake of Aaron Maria Spinoza.

The room beyond was close and dimly lit, smelling of joss smoke, burnt spices, sweet opium, and orange blossoms. Before them was a tall

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carved spirit screen, hiding the rest of the room. Curtains, a thick carpet, and the closed door muffled the drum beat, making King Ahab's music sound far off and other worldly, like a rap-rapping on your coffin lid.

Stepping out from behind the spirit screen Boy Toy saw no sign of the cat. The only illumination came from a tall candle. Two women were seated facing each other; between them was a clear spherical crystal the size of her head, resting on a small table draped with black silk. Sitting cross legged on a dark cushion was the black woman she had seen earlier, still wearing the black dress and kerchief. In the dimness her eyes shone like hardened gems, their hypnotic gaze filling the small room, looking nowhere and everywhere.

The other woman was white, young and pretty with her hair in short gold ringlets. She had on an elaborate flowered dress and a high stiff cameo necklace. A lace handkerchief and a small package tied with string lay in her lap. She was staring into the crystal, brows knit, concentrating. Her cupid's bow lips parted, and she whispered hoarsely, "It looks like him, but Mama Love, how may I know?"

Boy Toy stared into the crystal too. The whole room with its curtains, heady incense, and smoke illumination seemed to focus attention on the sphere. In its depths, she could see sensuous movement, bare flowing contours, twining into each other, releasing and twining again with the suggestion of fevered embrace. She was not sure how much she wanted to see.

The young white woman brought the lace handkerchief up to her lips, muttering that she could not be sure.

"Then perhaps child, you should ask them." Mama Love lifted her arm pointing toward Boy Toy, and the drumming rose, as though Mama Love could control the tempo.

The white woman looked toward Boy Toy and nearly leaped out of her flowered gown. To her it must have seemed that they came from nowhere.

"Do not fear, child," said Mama Love. "This is our associate, Mr. Aaron Maria Spinoza, and Miss Boy Toy, a girl that has come under our protection." Mama Love's soft, commanding voice seemed to tug at your soul. Hearing her own name, Boy Toy felt like she was being given an identity.

The blonde woman's eyes were opened unnaturally wide, staring as though she could no more speak than spit.

"I have shown Mrs. Lealand the crystal," said Mama Love, "and her

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husband's infidelities, but the poor child barely believes what she sees."

Aaron Spinoza leaned forward adjusting his glasses and studying the depths of the crystal with lively interest. "It appears to be Senator Lealand — though I never saw him bounding about in bed before — but with his britches down and his flag up, his wife should know him better than most." He peered deeper into the crystal. "Neither of the women looks familiar, though the white one has an engaging bottom and a buxom enthusiasm that I would be likely to remember."

The blonde woman blushed, glancing quickly at the crystal. "Oh, it is him. It is just, well, perhaps. . . ."

"Afraid you are seeing through the power of suggestion?" asked Aaron. The young woman nodded gravely, not daring to look at Mama Love.

"Well, you are," Aaron answered his own question cheerfully. "But just because this is an illusion doesn't mean it is a lie, Mrs. Lealand. My investigations of your husband have turned up convincing proof of every form of adultery and fornication a civilized person could aspire to, and a few that would come as a surprise to most folks."

The white woman twisted her handkerchief. "But have you anything that would stand up in court?"

"Alas," said Aaron, "our most reliable witnesses are Chinese." The woman's eyes turned to Boy Toy, giving her a look of anguished curiosity, touched with scorn.

Aaron went on in his dry way. "Mrs. Stanley Lealand, I would like to introduce Boy Toy, a pious virgin, twice orphaned and raised by American missionaries. During my investigations I had the good fortune to pluck her from the hands of the Hip Yee Tong, who were acting for your husband. Had we not been prompt, and lucky, you would probably be seeing her now in that crystal ball."

The woman's scorn was replaced by confusion, since like most of San Francisco, she had expected Boy Toy to be a prostitute.

In quiet terms, Boy Toy told her whole story; how she had been scooped up at the docks, taken to the Queen's Room, and what had happened there. She explained how she had appealed to Senator Lealand for help, and he had instead stolen her letter and made arrangements to purchase her. It amazed her that she could recount the events so simply and forcefully, but she realized that for the first time she was telling them to a woman who might understand. They had both been wronged by the same man.

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Once it was clear that she had not actually been to bed with Senator Lealand, his wife was full of sympathy. The blonde woman told Boy Toy she was mortified by what her husband had done, or almost done, and she took a moment to thank God on the spot for seeing Boy Toy to safety.

Aaron muttered an amen.

Twisting her handkerchief harder, Mrs. Lealand admitted that she had questioned her husband's fidelity, especially since finding out he had purchased a bordello.

Aaron agreed buying a knocking stop tried a wife's trust.

"But he claimed it was a business venture."

Aaron gently pointed out that it would not be the first time that a husband's passion for business tempted him to neglect his wife. "The biggest proof of our *bona fides* is we are not asking for money," Aaron reminded her. "In fact, we intend to make you a rich and free woman."

Boy Toy saw Mrs. Lealand dry her tears, listening more sharply.

"You could try to divorce your husband," said Aaron, "but you would have to search hard in San Francisco to find twelve men, white and true, who would convict another white man of adultery just for screwing a few dozen Irish whores and China Girls. If you find twelve men so inclined, Senator Lealand would see that not one of these saints ever sat in a jury box."

The Senator's wife admitted that she had dined and entertained the cream of California's legal profession, and what Aaron said was probably correct.

"Or you could stay married to Senator Lealand, sharing his marriage bed when he gets an itch for something different. Or you could do as Mama Love says."

Everyone turned toward Mama Love. Boy Toy saw the old black woman was smiling, looking as benign as she was powerful, showing no trace of menace. Her eyes shone with kindness and understanding. "Honey, we aren't asking for your money, or to harm you. We are offering help. Your husband has betrayed your trust, just as he robbed Mr. Aaron Spinoza, and shamed Miss Boy Toy."

Boy Toy saw Mrs. Lealand leaning forward, lips parted, eyes moist, clutching her package and handkerchief.

Mama Love's words were like soft lulling strokes. "Mrs. Lealand, I mean to free you from a loveless marriage; not the freedom that comes

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from a divorce that leaves you in the streets, but the freedom that comes from having some of what your husband has, what he wants to keep selfishly for himself."

Mrs. Lealand looked torn. She blinked and stared down at her package, but Boy Toy could see she was not blinking back tears. Mrs. Lealand's look was more calculating. She asked in a weak voice, "How much?"

Without looking, Boy Toy could hear the smile in Mama Love's voice. "Enough, child. Enough so you can live in comfort. And Miss Boy Toy can have her freedom. And Mr. Spinoza can have his railroad." She marveled that the black woman had so casually included her name, and that the woman never said what Mama Love was going to get. Boy Toy saw Mrs. Lealand hesitate, make intention movements, then hand the package to Mama Love.

The black woman chuckled, and in return gave Mrs. Lealand a slip of paper with characters on it, looking just like the laundry ticket Aaron and King Ahab had rolled and smoked. Boy Toy watched Mrs. Lealand fold the ticket, like a woman accustomed to sending out her laundry.

Mama Love slit the string on the package with a long sharp fingernail. Inside was a man's silk shirt, somewhat the worse for wear. It was natural to get a dirty shirt in exchange for a laundry ticket, but Boy Toy could not imagine what the trade was about. Mama Love seemed to be going to tremendous trouble just to take in laundry.

Mrs. Lealand stood up, still seeming nervous and unsure. Aaron offered to escort her to her hackney. "Since this neighborhood is not the best." He fetched his sawed-off Whitney, then led Mrs. Lealand out through the door concealed in the curtains. Boy Toy was alone with Mama Love.

She was no longer in the least afraid of the black woman, but she was almighty curious. Mama Love seemed to know this right away, and asked, "Are you wondering why I am doing all this?"

Boy Toy nodded gravely.

"Child, I am much older than you, but in our hearts we are not so different. Tell me why you came to America."

Boy Toy explained her ambition to become a missionary, to help build the New China. She felt transported by Mama Love's good faith and affection, and for the first time that day she was at home in this strange land. At the same time she was able to remember how it had been in Old China, how she had been shielded by her own mother's love, but brought up to

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believe that there was more to life than being sheltered and privileged, brought up to believe in the New China where love and brotherhood would replace the rule of the Manchu.

The black woman smiled. "Well, in her own way, Mama Love is a missionary. Only I am not building the New China, maybe I am building the New America. Believe me, Mama Love knows what it is like to be enslaved, to be shamed, and to be robbed of the fruits of her labor by men holding the public's trust. So when Mr. Spinoza came to me, I agreed to help him."

"But how will you help?"

She saw Mama Love run wrinkled hands over the shirt, smoothing out the silk. "This shirt belonged to a bad man; well, maybe not *bad*, but certainly thoughtless, selfish, and cruel. There is a good deal of him still in the shirt. Mama Love is going to turn his thoughtless selfishness to good ends."

"How?"

Instead of answering, Mama Love cocked her head. Her attention was suddenly elsewhere. Boy Toy realized that King Ahab's drumming had stopped. She looked toward the spirit screen, and saw the Jamaican step around it.

Mama Love spoke in a low voice. "King Ahab, you had better fetch Mr. Aaron Spinoza. A man is coming down from the roof."

King Ahab glanced toward Boy Toy, clearly worried. "Don't fret for this child," said Mama Love. "I will see she is safe." Without a word, King Ahab slipped out the door that Aaron and Mrs. Lealand had used.

Chilled, Boy Toy moved closer to Mama Love. "Who's coming?"

"Don't fret, child, Mama Love has you." The old woman put her arm around Boy Toy's shoulder. There was a faint scraping, like a latch being pulled back, and Mau Yee stepped around the spirit screen, hatchet in hand.

"No California gentleman or lady *ever abuses or oppresses a Chinaman. . . . Only the scum of the population do it, and likewise the policemen and politicians, for these are dust-licking pimps and slaves to that scum, here as well as elsewhere in America.*

— Mark Twain

* * *

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El Dorado

BOY TOY could see Mau Yee was dangerously agitated, no longer the composed and confident boxer he had been at the docks. His gaze kept darting from her to Mama Love, as if the hatchet man expected the old woman to spring at his throat with fang and claw. His lips moved slowly. "You, Boy Toy, must come with me."

"No, Mau Yee, I will not go." She drew strength from Mama Love. Mau Yee lifted his hatchet. Boy Toy stood up straight on trembling legs. "Mau Yee, you may kill me, but you may not take me away." Exhaustion and desperation made her reckless. As long as she was in this room, she was not alone. She would not be dragged back into the heartless city.

Mama Love spoke in an even, soothing manner. If Mau Yee did not catch all the words, he would feel the tone. "Tell him, if he harms you, child, no one will protect him, not Mr. Lealand who wants you alive, and not the Hip Yee who will be out $3,700. Mr. Aaron will track him down, and my spirit will pursue his ghost beyond the grave."

Boy Toy translated. "You know what you do is wrong. Why does a Triad risk death and damnation in an ignoble cause?"

Mau Yee looked directly at her, still not lowering his hatchet. "Even a gangster has his honor. Without the brotherhood of the Hip Yee, I am nothing."

"You are still a man, Mau Yee." As silent as death Aaron Spinoza stepped around the spirit screen, aiming his sawed-off Whitney at the small of Mau Yee's back. Boy Toy said, "Be a man, Mau Yee, and live, do not serve the King of the Dead."

Aaron's gravelly voice added, "I hope you are telling this highbinder to drop his hatchet, before I am forced to scatter his guts out onto the Bay."

She saw Mau Yee stiffen, then relax. He did not scare easy. Instead of dropping his hatchet, he returned it to his coat, rotating slowly so he could see both Aaron and Mama Love.

"You have made the right choice, Mau Yee." Boy Toy smiled with unfeigned delight, having been too close to death herself.

"Let's go back in the other room," said Aaron. "Mama Love is going to have to make Medicine here, and I hate to get blood on her carpets."

Boy Toy stepped up to the highbinder, inviting him to lead her into the little bare room beyond the spirit screen. As she entered, she saw King

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Ahab sitting in the corner with the Springfield carbine across his lap. Aaron set his Whitney down within reach, but kept the Colt Lightning in his belt, saying, "You may tell Mau Yee he is one mean highbinder. I whipped a half-dozen Irish pug-uglies with the ax-handle he snapped like a cheap pine board."

Boy Toy translated, and Mau Yee replied, "Someday I will show him how to fight without his barking dogs," by which he meant guns.

Aaron added, "While we are getting so chummy, ask him if he has a honey." Boy Toy stiffened, but Aaron insisted. "Ask him. All these highbinders have a little whore that they have gone soft on."

She spoke with Mau Yee, listened intently, then said, "It is so very sad. He does have a sweetheart. Her name is Ah Ho, and she is kept in a house off Spofford Alley." She guessed that right now Ah Ho was hard at work, "pleezing" any man that came along.

"Ask him the price of her contract, and if he wants to buy her free."

Boy Toy asked. Mau Yee looked miserable, saying, "Seven hundred dollars. I am saving, but maybe Ah Ho does not even love me, and just wants to whore."

Aaron snorted when he heard the answer. "You tell him, Boy Toy. There is not a goddamned woman in all Chinatown who just wants to whore. If there were, I would marry her myself, and live off her earnings. As it is I have nothing saved for my old age." He reached into his coat and withdrew a wad of bills big enough to plug a pipe drain. "This is a thousand dollars. Mau Yee can have it this time tomorrow, if he helps me. He can buy Ah Ho's freedom and run from the Hip Yees, to L.A., or to Canton for all I care."

Boy Toy explained about the money. May Yee smiled,"Who does he want dead?"

Aaron said he did not have to kill anyone. "I want you to get word to Stanley Lealand, that the China Girl he wants will be at the El Dorado tomorrow night. If Lealand shows, Mau Yee's got his money." Aaron peeled off a hundred dollar bill, and tossed it to Mau Yee.

Boy Toy translated, then said, "It is a strange thing you ask of him." She thought it was pretty peculiar, too. "He adds that you have no reason to treat him so well."

"I have my reasons," said Aaron. "Ask him if I may borrow his hatchet." Mau Yee handed over the hatchet, looking suspicious, but Aaron merely

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used it to bust up a crate. He fed the wood into the iron stove and lit it with a Locofoco match.

When he got his hatchet back, Mau Yee said, "Since we are being friends, tell him the Hip Yee will be sending more than me tonight."

Aaron produced a pack of cards, shuffling while Boy Toy translated. "You may tell Mau Yee he's the only Hip Yee who fretted me."

"He says they are sending ghosts." When Aaron made no comment, she asked, "What are these spooks?"

"It's the Hoodoo," said Aaron continuing to shuffle, "like the cat you said you saw."

"I did see a cat."

"You thought you saw a cat. That is how Hoodoo works. Here watch my hands." As he spoke, he flicked five cards off the deck onto the bare boards in front of him.

Boy Toy said she knew nothing about playing cards. Aaron said that did not matter, spreading the cards out. "These four are kings, and that one's an ace. In plain poker, not playing straight flushes nor wild cards, four kings and an ace is an unbeatable hand; because only four aces can beat four kings, and you have one ace in hand." He tapped the ace. "In fact, it is the rarest unbeatable hand; there are only four ways you can make it out of two and a half million possible hands."

He scooped up the cards, put them onto the deck and did an elaborate overhanded shuffle. "Now you see me mixing the cards. Right?" He set the deck down. "Now cut."

Boy Toy did not know what he meant, but Mau Yee reached over and divided the deck into two almost even piles. Aaron scooped up the two halves, first the bottom, then the top. He held the deck high with one hand. "Completely mixed, and you saw me do it." Then he flipped over the top five cards. Four kings and an ace lay on the floorboards. "Same cards," he said. "The odds against that happening are better than two million to one."

"Now watch while I do it again." Boy Toy watched. She could see the cards mixing, and this time she cut. Aaron even had her turn over the top five cards. They were the same.

"I could have an unbeatable hand every time I dealt," said Aaron, "which would surely get me shot."

"How do you do it?" Boy Toy did not know four kings from a pair of

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deuces, but she could tell these were the same cards as before.

Aaron picked up the cards and started to shuffle. "I did it the simplest way there is. I never mixed those kings in. Right now it looks like I am mixing the cards, but I am keeping those four kings and that ace out of the shuffle. Your eyes see the cards moving, your mind tells you they are being shuffled, but the mind and eye are fooled."

King Ahab gasped, pointing the Springfield carbine at the wall behind Boy Toy. She swung about. Emerging from the wall was a nightmare figure, a huge Manchu warrior, an Imperial Bannerman in black lacquered armor, shining like a giant grotesque beetle. Peacock tail banners fluttered behind his back, and a green grinning face leered from behind the bars on his huge pagoda helmet. He was stepping straight out of the wall, flourishing a sword as big as Boy Toy.

Out of a corner of her eye she saw Aaron slap down the cards and scoop up his Whitney. With a deafening roar, flame jumped from one barrel of the shotgun, filling the room with smoke and making the window curtains leap. The Bannerman vanished as the wall behind him exploded, leaving a gaping hole surrounded by pock marks where the Bannerman had been.

Aaron broke open the shotgun, popping in a fresh 10-gauge shell. "Bet you saw something really bad," he said. Boy Toy's ears were still ringing and she did not answer. He snapped the shotgun shut. "Well, what you saw was a spook."

"How could you shoot a ghost?" Boy Toy stared at the ragged hole.

"I did not shoot him," said Aaron, "because he was not there, but my shotgun sure took your mind off whatever you were seeing. Chinese use the same principle when they chase off demons with fire crackers. The Hip Yee have put their Hoodoo on us, trying to spook us, maybe scare us into giving you up. But with Mama Love making Medicine for us, their Hoodoo will be weak, and we can wait it out."

He passed the cards back to her, inviting her to cut. With shaking hands she divided the deck. Again Aaron seemed to take the bottom half and place it on top, but when he dealt the top hand was still four kings and an ace.

Watching intently, Mau Yee asked, "Can he show me how to win at Fan Tan?" Boy Toy translated. She knew Fan Tan as a popular guessing game, where each player tried to predict the number of coins remaining

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under an overturned bowl, after they had been divided by four.

"Fan Tan?" Aaron looked disgusted. "No one but the house wins at fornicating Fan Tan. There is no edge to the game. Only a Chinese would gamble when everyone's chances are even. It is in the Chinese character to expect order and justice. Look, Mau Yee, do you want to die rich?"

Mau Yee said he wanted to die in China.

"Well, if you want to die rich in China, you have to learn poker or black jack."

A raging piebald bull burst through the window, parting the curtains like an express train charging out of a tunnel. Boy Toy could see the bull's great bloodshot eyes, and his huge nostrils snorting smoke and flames. This time Aaron drew his belt gun, firing a double-action Colt Lightning as fast as he could pull the trigger. The bull vanished, and Aaron's bullets went whizzing off into the night, over the rooftops of San Francisco. Fortunately, Chinatown was high on a hill.

He broke open the Colt and fished in his pocket for more .38 cartridges. "There are two secrets to gambling: the secret of winning and the secret of losing. The secret of winning is to know the odds. Watch the cards, and bet when the odds are with you, and fold when they are against you, then you will win — not every hand, but over the long run. Since the odds in Fan Tan are always the same, the only way to get rich is to open a parlor, charge for the use of the tables, and let other fools play Fan Tan."

"You make it sound too simple," said King Ahab.

"All truths are simple," insisted Aaron. "But winning is not enough. You must also convince someone to lose. There are a million ways to win; you can play the odds, trim aces, mark cards, carry a cold deck or aces up your sleeve — you can even use the Hoodoo — but none of these will avail if no one wants to lose to you. Gambling houses hate a winner. Go into a gambling den and beat them every day, and soon they won't let you play; it's plain bad for business — *and they won't care how you are winning.*"

A grinning, skeletal ghoul, with his fangs dripping gore slowly materialized in their midst. Mau Yee threw his hatchet through the monster, while King Ahab fired off the .46 carbine. The ghoul faded away with a distressed look on its face.

"Gambling houses stay in business by making it pleasant, even exciting, to lose," said Aaron. "They treat the loser like a king, providing him

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with food and drink in a luxurious setting, allowing women of easy virtue to rub up against him. They will ply the loser with every pleasure known to men so he may give up his money, and come back when he has more. Most gamblers lose. Not one in twenty has a bank account. Some will play poker like assassins, then throw their winnings away on the ponies. Winning takes hard work and strict accounting. Losing is open to all. That is the secret of losing."

"What good is this to us?" Boy Toy was bewildered by the torrent of words, and the thunderous interruptions.

"We need to draw Stanley Lealand into a game," said Aaron, "and convince him to bet everything, even the Monterey Spur on a losing hand."

She remembered the Senator's cool confidence. "That hardly seems possible."

"Unless I miss my guess," said Aaron, "it will happen tomorrow night."

Boy Toy gave in before the Hip Yee Tong. She dozed off as ghosts continued to appear: a great green ape, a silver-gold dragon, a headless fiend, a half-man half-tiger. All were dispatched with wild volleys and raucous laughter from the men. Between apparitions, Aaron Spinoza introduced Mau Yee to blackjack, Poor Man's Baccarat, showing him a betting system that required counting the number of tens and court cards that had been played.

Soon Aaron had mastered enough pidgin Cantonese — words like "bet" and "stand" — that he no longer needed Boy Toy to translate. She was exceedingly grateful, for she had not slept since coming ashore; having been by turns too excited, too horrified, and too tense to shut her eyes. Slipping into an exhausted stupor, she curled up against Aaron's suitcase, jerked awake every so often by the roar of gunfire.

Awaking to her first morning in America, she saw the room a shambles; three walls were riddled with bullets, and the curtains were shredded by gunshots. Only the door and wall adjoining Mama Love's room were untouched; no "spooks" had come from that direction. Aaron and Mau Yee were gone, which made her nervous. They were dangerous and violent men, but comforting to have within call. King Ahab was still sitting in the corner with the carbine across his lap, rolling his morning cigarette, a huge tube packed with hemp leaves. He smiled at her and said good day.

A moment later the door swung open and Mama Love appeared. In daylight she looked even older to Boy Toy, with wisps of steel-gray hair

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straying from under her black kerchief. Her face looked haggard, as though she too had passed a hard night, but she gave Boy Toy a warm smile, rolling her big eyes, surveying the wreckage. "My, my, but them men made a mess of things."

Boy Toy felt very much a mess herself. Her *chengosams* were a mass of wrinkles, no longer pure white but dirty from being dragged over roofs and spattered with garbage. Like everything else in the room, they smelled of gunsmoke and were covered with a grimy powder residue. She was also famished, having eaten nothing but cold tortillas since coming to America.

Mama Love settled down beside her, patting her, calling her "poor child," and promising that things would soon be better.

"All of us have too much to do today, and when Mr. Aaron Spinoza gets back Mama Love will have to leave. Tonight will be as difficult as last night, different but every bit as difficult." Boy Toy could see the woman was holding tight to the shirt that Mrs. Lealand had given her. Mama Love leaned over and kissed Boy Toy on the forehead.

Aaron arrived whistling through his teeth and looking not in the least affected by the night's ordeal. He was wearing a starched white suit that appeared brand new, and a crisp straw hat with a scarlet band. Parcels of various sizes were tucked under his arms, and a rope bucket hung from one hand. He began tossing the parcels about like a white-suited Santa. "This is what you ordered, Mama Love. Luckily we are in Chinatown; it's hard to get ground goat's hooves and unicorn horn anywhere else in town. King Ahab, here's your monkey suit." He set the bucket down in their midst. "This tub of tamales is for everyone."

The tamales turned out to be corn husks wrapped around warm corn meal filled with shredded meat. Boy Toy found them gross and spicy, but delicious in her present starved condition. As she ate, Aaron opened her parcel personally. His worn face beaming, he presented her with a shimmering high-collared silk gown, trimmed with tiny peach roses and jade buttons. King Ahab's package contained a ruffled silk shirt, stove-pipe pants, and a red velvet coat with tails. Aaron said they had to step out into the street "in style," because "We're already registered at the Palace Hotel, and we have to look sharp to claim our suite."

Mama Love took Boy Toy to her room, fussing over her and the dress, fixing up her hair with pearl studded combs. When she was done, she pulled back a curtain to reveal a full length mirror. Boy Toy found her

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transformation stunning. Only her red silk slippers remained the same. She looked older, more dignified, with pearls twined in her dark hair, and jade teardrops on her white gown. Mama Love said, "Magnificent." She held Boy Toy's shoulders hard, saying, "No matter what happens tonight, remember, child, Mama Love will be with you in spirit." She kissed her again, and turned her over to Aaron and King Ahab.

By the time Boy Toy was out on the street, she was already missing Mama Love. A terrifying crowd of men thronged along Stockton Street: swearing stevedores, sailors fresh off the boats, big Irishmen with guns and badges and bumarees with carpet bags and crushed hats. An open coach sat waiting to take her to the Palace Hotel, with Mau Yee sitting on the high seat behind the horses dressed in a black silk suit and looking like a Manchu butler.

As King Ahab helped her into the carriage, Aaron leaned over and ripped down a fresh wall poster. He tossed it into her lap, saying, "Can you read this? It has the Hip Yee chop on it."

Boy Toy gasped. "This says the Hip Yee Tong will reward any man who kills you. It gives your name and description." She was amazed to see a solicitation for murder hanging in plain sight. Several more were plastered to nearby buildings.

Aaron seated himself beside her. "What sort of money are they offering?"

"Five hundred dollars." It slowly occurred to her that there was probably not a single policeman in San Francisco who could read Chinese.

"That is no reward, that is an insult." Aaron waved for King Ahab to start the horses. "Your meanest, most hopeless hophead would spit at $500 for killing a white man. Five thousand would be nearer the mark. The Hip Yees are playing with us. They should know such antics only bring them down."

Five hundred was enough to give Boy Toy the shivers. Riding through the streets, she saw dozens of armed men, and she braced herself to leap overboard if anyone sprayed the carriage with bullets.

The Palace Hotel was imposing with its wide lobby, crystal chandeliers, plush velvet, and flower vases of cut bohemian glass. "Beware," said Aaron, "small dogs have been known to lose themselves in the nap of these carpets." Smart young men in tight pants and pill-box hats carried their bags upstairs. As they ascended, she felt that every man's eye was on

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her. Safe in their panelled suite, she collapsed into a deep sofa, saying, "I thought they were all looking at me."

"Well, I should hope so," said Aaron, opening a carpet bag and removing an opium lamp and a long-stemmed pipe. "You are far safer being a spectacle. No one grabs paying guests out of Palace suites."

"I must stay here to be safe?" She surveyed the high draped windows, with a view of the bay. Each one had an elegant little window seat. A ribboned basket of fruit sat on a table trimmed with french lace.

"There are worse fates," Aaron assured her, "but we cannot afford the rates." He lit the lamp and dug a small lump of opium out of his five-tael tin, plastering it like putty into the pipe bowl. "I advise you to settle back and have a smoke, does wonders for your digestion."

"No, I must not." She looked nervously at the pipe. The calm it offered was inviting.

"Here, have some," he said. "You are shaky as a cat licking coffee. We are here to rest and to advertise ourselves. Before we get to the El Dorado, I want the rumor going ahead of us that a Chinese princess has checked into the Palace."

"Who would believe a Manchu Princess speaks English and stays in American hotels?"

"They'll believe it because they are a bunch of dumb, round-eyed barbarians, and because the Hoodoo will be with you. They will be worked up and ready to see a princess. When you start winning, it will make you even more special."

"But I cannot do it," said Boy Toy miserably, wishing Mama Love were there. Her carefully hoarded confidence had evaporated. "I cannot play cards. It is unchristian. The New China will not have gambling halls or gaming parlors."

"You don't have to play. A princess does not need to touch money, nor handle cards. Her servants do that. Cards may be unchristian, but my mama was a jack-Mormon, and my daddy was a Jew turned Mason, which makes me as much a heathen as Mau Yee over there." He indicated the highbinder, sitting calmly in his new black silks.

He offered her the opium again. "I can see the New China will be a splendid place, full of psalm singing and pious spinsters flailing away on the piano, but this is Old San Francisco. I need you, Boy Toy, but you are not my slave. If you wish, I will turn you over to the Christians at the

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Presbyterian Mission, but I warn you they will offer little protection. They can only hide you in a room poorer than this one. You dare not go to the police, for they are a bunch of Ned Baileys in the employ of men like Senator Lealand. If you have not the money to purchase a lawyer, the police will hand you cheerfully over to the Hip Yees.

He cocked his head over toward Mau Yee. "Or you may appeal to the Six Companies that run Chinatown."

She asked Mau Yee who the Six Companies were, and what protection they could offer. The hatchet man laughed. "The Six Companies are useless rice ladles." He assured her that the Chinese companies could not stand up to the salaried soldiers of the Hip Yee Tong.

"So you see," said Aaron spreading his hands, "this is not the New China. Here in the Old USA we are all slaves to money. Tonight you are going to make us a lot of money. If a busted old duffer like me beat the El Dorado, it would not create a spectacle, nor entice Senator Lealand into a game. They would call me a cheat, or slip in a House mechanic with a loaded pistol and a rigged deck. With you it will be different. Losing to a princess will seem like a privilege, a story the El Dorado can bank on for years to come."

He pressed the pipe into her hands. "I need you to go into that casino fully rested, talking and smiling, making those men think you are something special."

She looked down at the pipe in her hands. Aaron touched the bowl to the lamp and steered the stem to her lips. The opium sizzled, gurgled and began to burn. She breathed in the hot, sweet smoke, and presently drifted into a dreamy sleep.

She dreamed of Mama Love, holding her and enfolding her, and replacing the mother she had lost. Between Mama Love and the opium, she awoke in a fine trim, relaxed and dreamy, ready to sit down to a sumptuous candlelit dinner. King Ahab had ordered boiled crayfish, steamed crab and Cajun baked blackfish brought up to the room where it was all served on Willow ware china and white tablecloths. Ahab swore none of it touched Jamaica, but in Babylon you had to make do.

While they ate, Aaron went over the betting. "I have a ten thousand dollar stake. This money is the blood, sweat, and tears of hundreds of families. We must win, or they will have nothing. I will handle the blackjack bets, but when Lealand sits down, it will be up to you. We will have

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at best one hand of poker with Lealand, and you must push the bet no matter what, getting him to put up the Monterey Spur." Such responsibility should have horrified her, but Boy Toy found herself brimming with confidence, as though Mama Love were at her side.

He finished by presenting her with a set of black lacquered false fingernails. She giggled and said that was going a bit far, but Aaron insisted, saying, "I can win at blackjack without touching the cards, but when we get down to poker, I need a pat excuse to shuffle and deal for you."

She played with her new fingernails, while Aaron buckled his shoulder holster under his coat, and slipped the Lightning inside. His suitcase was staying in the hotel. Buoyed by her nap and meal, and by the opium, she floated down to the lobby and off to the El Dorado. She was no longer alarmed by the wild sea of big men; with their great black beards, round eyes, hooked noses, and white, brown, and black skins. When they reached Portsmith Square, where the central plaza of Spanish San Francisco had been, half the men in town seemed to be there, drunk, waving, yelling jokes, the more foolish ones firing off their pistols.

Stepping out of the carriage, she saw every man's face turned to look at her. Why shouldn't they stare, she thought; I must look as strange to them as they are to me. So she gave each man a broad and earnest Christian smile, drawing encouragement from the happy looks she got in return. She noted that they crowded after her.

Americans had turned the Old Spanish plaza into a park, knocking down adobes and putting up gambling halls. The Bella Union, Veranda, and the El Dorado stood at one corner of the square. Within walking distance were the Parker House, Empire, Alhambra, and a half dozen other gaming dens. Sinful as it was, she liked the look of the El Dorado. It was taller, set back from the street with trees in front, lit by gaslamps. She walked in with her head held high, aware she was trailed by a crowd of curious men. The inside was not near as rich as the Palace, but ten times as gaudy with gilt walls, tall mirrors, and fresco copies of Titian nudes. The gilded walls, veiled lamps and cigar smoke gave the air a golden glow.

She heard the click of dice, slap of cards, and clink of money subside as heads turned her way. "Who is she?" went round the tables. "Some sort of fancy whore," said a hopeful voice. "Nah, it's the princess from the Palace."

Men leaped up to offer her their seats, but Aaron steered her toward a particular blackjack table and a particular dealer. King Ahab seated her,

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ordering tea. Aaron and Mau Yee were on her right and left, keeping the crowd back, while King Ahab gripped her chair covering her cards. Beyond them stood the crowd: high rollers with cigars and top hats, *Californios* wrapped in blankets and smoking *cigaritas*, trappers down from the Sierras in greasy fringed leather and ratty leggings.

Aaron leaned over toward the dealer, who looked young and a little amazed. Softly the big man said things like, "Her Highness will play *vingt-et-un*. Her Highness will purchase chips worth 300 ounces in gold."

Giving the gangling dealer a solicitous look, she added, "If you please, sir."

A shocked ripple ran around the table. "By God, she does talk."

The dealer deftly measured out thirty blood-red ten-ounce chips, and Aaron paid with a bank draft, stacking the chips before Boy Toy, leaving one out as an opening bet. Someone behind her asked where the whore got so much gold, but the men on either side shut him up, saying he was a bad-mouthed drunken bastard, apologizing to the princess.

Boy Toy thanked them, ignoring the cards that came slithering across the green felt table. Knowing next to nothing about blackjack, she could concentrate on the men, giving each one a smile of greeting. Aaron tipped up the corners of the cards, whispering their value into her ear — a five and eight, making thirteen. The dealer was showing a red seven, with his hole card hidden. She chattered to Aaron in Cantonese, pretending to give instructions.

"Her Highness," he said, "will have another card." The dealer flipped them a nine to make 22, a bust. He turned over his hole card, a three, and took their chip. Aaron put out two chips to replace the lost one.

With Aaron minding the cards, Boy Toy felt free to enjoy herself. For the first time since coming to San Francisco, she was able to meet the men on equal terms, talking, laughing and asking questions, telling them how happy she was to be here in America. She was delighted to discover that they were polite and well mannered, tickled to talk to her. She deflected all questions about her history, insisting she wanted to hear about their country. And they were happy to describe their native land, with its grand spaces and great people — give or take a few Micks, Spicks, and Injuns — why she was one lucky princess to come to California.

She also refused to discuss her play, though she could see Aaron was raising the bets, betting ten or a dozen red chips at a time. A princess did

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not care if she won or lost. She noted that sometimes Aaron would cut back his bets, which meant the deck had only the low cards that favored the house. Then he would say Her Highness wanted a shuffle, "Just for luck." Men pressed her about wild swings in the betting, but she laughed and said she bet on whim, waiting for the God of Luck to speak to her. Word went around the casino that she was using some sort of Chinese magic.

After hours of playing and chatting, Aaron asked for the blue hundred ounce chips, and she knew they were far ahead. She felt sorry for the sweating dealer as the El Dorado's money slipped through his fingers. Aaron would switch back and forth, putting out red chips when the odds favored the house, bringing out the blue ones when the deck was rich with high cards, all the time pretending to consult Boy Toy.

By watching, she picked up the rhythm of blackjack, and some of Aaron's system. When the dealer slid a pair of queens across the table, she knew now that was twenty points, just one short of a winning 21. The dealer dealt himself a 6, and a face down hole card. Aaron whispered, "Split the queens. There are no low cards left and he's bound to bust." Using a lacquered fingernail, Boy Toy flicked the two red queens face up, telling the dealer she wanted to play two hands. To the circle of men she explained, "Queens are very lucky for me." Aaron doubled the bet, so each queen had two blue chips covering her, $3,000 riding on each hand.

The dealer nodded grimly, dealing her a seven and a queen of spades. Without waiting for Aaron, Boy Toy split her queens again. That must have been right because Aaron plunked down $3,000 more on the queen of spades. The shaking dealer gave her two more cards, a red ten and the queen of clubs. Poor man, thought Boy Toy, he is about to faint. She pushed the queen of clubs to one side, and Aaron put a pair of chips on it. Before taking her hand away she tapped the queen and two blue chips with a black fingernail, smiling graciously to the dealer. "This bet is for you. If my queen wins, the money is yours."

Men pressed closer, craning their necks. The dealer licked his lips, staring at the black queen and two blue chips, dealing a nine and a jack of clubs to match the queen. Now there were four hands in front of Boy Toy totaling 17, 20, 19, and 20. The dealer flipped over his hole card, another jack, giving him 16. He had to take another card.

Everyone but Boy Toy eyed the dealer's sweaty fingers as he slid the

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top card off the deck. Boy Toy looked straight into the man's eyes, giving him an encouraging grin. If this last card was a five, the El Dorado would win all four hands, but the dealer himself would be out the $3,000 that Boy Toy was offering him. His trembling fingers turned over a seven giving him 23, a bust.

Pandemonium swept through the El Dorado. "The Princess" had won $12,000 on the turn of a card, and given $3,000 of it away. The dealer struggled to his feet, pocketing the two blue chips, and saying he would not play any longer. If the El Dorado wanted to keep losing, they had to find someone else to deal the cards.

A dirty shirted miner in canvas pants wanted to know why she had given away 200 ounces of gold. Boy Toy asked blandly, "Is that very much? I thought these were Chinese dollars." They yelled, laughed, and slapped the table, saying the Princess was a real card. "Goddamn, these are genuine American dollars, not those cheap Mexican dollars you got in China."

As the laughter died, the smoky sea of men parted, and Stanley Lealand stepped up to the chair where the dealer had been sitting. He stood there, staring hard at Boy Toy, his silk ruffles reminding her of the shirt she had seen in Mama Love's hands. Ned Bailey was behind him, along with another policeman. Seeing Lealand blew away her giddy confidence. She felt both awe and revulsion, but she told herself to be pleasant and polite, not to antagonize. "Mr. Lealand, we meet again. Please be seated."

Lealand looked down at the chair, as if he had never seen one before. Other men's hands pulled the chair back, and the crowd hustled him into his seat. Eager and expectant, they pressed around the table, hemming him in. Boy Toy saw Aaron take a blue chip off the stacks and hand it to Mau Yee. She nodded to the highbinder, saying in Cantonese, "Whatever happens now, that is yours." Then she turned back to face the man across the table.

"Are you the girl I talked to in the Queen's Room?" The Senator had a troubled look on his face, as if he were not sure why he was there. Like the Crows said, he was a breath feather, blown there whether he willed it or not.

Boy Toy did not answer directly, instead she said, "This House will no longer deal blackjack to me. I was hoping you would play poker." She knew that poker was the name of the game that Aaron wanted to play.

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Men cheered, slapping Lealand on the back, saying he didn't dare play. "This cute little Princess had just plucked the El Dorado. Now her eyes are on your wallet." Advice like that made it harder for Lealand to say no, not without being remembered as the Senator who slunk out of the El Dorado rather than risk a hand with a China Girl. Lealand looked hard at her, asking evenly, "What stakes?"

She casually indicated the chips on the table. "We can play for these. It is not my money." Men laughed even more.

Glancing at the piles of red and blue chips. Lealand asked the nearest dealer to give him the same amount and charge it to his account. Everyone watched while the chips were counted, and Boy Toy was startled to hear there was $70,000 on the table. "Them's real American dollars, Princess," the dealer assured her.

Was she risking too much? Standing behind her, Aaron said nothing. She could only plunge ahead.

The El Dorado dealer supplied a deck, placing it between the two players. Lealand said, "A lady deals first."

She thanked him and tapped the deck with her nail. Aaron bent down and spread out the cards to see the deck was full and fair, then began to shuffle. It was the first time that night that he had a deck in his hands. Lealand looked from Aaron's hands to hers. "You did not have long nails last night."

She studied her nails. "False vanity, Mr. Lealand. Many things have changed since last night."

Aaron thumped the deck down in front of Lealand. The Senator cut, and Aaron scooped up the deck. To Boy Toy it looked like he placed the bottom on top, but she knew now not to trust her eyes. "Her Highness plays only straight poker," said Aaron. "No wild cards or straight flushes." These were his first words since the Senator sat down.

"Her Highness?" Lealand raised an eyebrow. "If it's straight poker the lady wants, straight poker's what we play."

Boy Toy did not know a straight flush from a crooked flue, so she just tried to seem at ease while Aaron dealt out the cards, five to her and five to Lealand. This time he did not tip up the corners or whisper in her ear. He seemed to be doing as much as he could to distance himself from the play.

For form's sake she peeked at her cards. There was only one face card,

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and the whole hand did not equal 21. It would have been a perfect blackjack hand, but this was poker, a game she knew nothing about. Lealand looked very pleased with his cards, tossing in four blue chips, $6,000. All Boy Toy could do was force the bet the way Aaron had said at dinner. Carefully lifting four chips off her stack, she met Lealand's bet, then added four more to raise him $6,000. Lealand met her $6,000 and raised a like amount.

So it went back and forth. The El Dorado had never seen such furious betting. As the chips piled up in the center of the table, men called for their buddies to come see the Senator and the Princess trying to buy the pot before there was even a draw. Boy Toy saw men scrambling up on the tables, and sitting on the bar to get a better view. She hoped Mama Love was with her, because now the opium had soured. Her hands were sweaty and her mouth was dry. Lealand at least knew what he was doing.

Suddenly she was out of chips. An amused Lealand matched her last bet with his last chips. "Well," he said, "I guess we had better call." He seemed totally confident.

Aaron said softly to Lealand, "Do you want a card?"

Lealand shook his head. "I couldn't be happier with this hand."

Since Lealand did not ask for a card, Boy Toy did not ask for one either. "Hot damn," said the mountain man, "both them coons got pat hands." A sharpie in a silk hat started booking side bets, and men put money on the hands, sight unseen. "Five hundred on the Senator's cards. A thousand on the Princess to win."

Lealand grinned at her across the huge pile of chips. "Since we have nothing left to bet, I guess we should show."

"No." She did not want to show. Aaron had said she must keep forcing the bet. Boy Toy reached inside her gown, took out a folded sheet of paper covered with Chinese characters, hesitated, then laid it alongside the chips.

"What's that?" muttered Ned Bailey. "A goddamn Chinese bank draft?" The Senator's backers yelled, "Hey honey, you gottee use American money." Lealand gave the document a puzzled look. "You said we were playing for table stakes. You cannot add to your chips now."

She looked coldly at Lealand, tapping the piece of paper. "This is a contract to work for twelve years as a prostitute. It is worth $3,700 dollars. That is the price that you put on me." She straightened up. "I am here at the table."

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As word went back through the crowd, men began to argue. Lealand's backers said the Princess was trying to buy the pot. Men with money on her said Lealand was raised out. "Appears the Senator will have to offer himself."

"That's silly, who would pay to screw a Senator?"

"Lots of folks would."

"Back in Washington they rent out by the hour."

Boy Toy forced herself to be firm. This man had shamed her. "I do not want his body. I want his railroad. He may match my contract with the Monterey Spur."

Lealand laughed, looking again at his cards which seemed to make him supremely confident. "The Monterey Spur is worth much more than $3,700."

"That is strange," she said, "I understood it was bankrupt." Now she heard Lealand's backers arguing among themselves. Some said she was still being unfair. Others did not care. "Put up the Spur." It wasn't their railroad, and they just wanted to see the cards. Everyone wanted to see the cards.

"Now what would you do with a railroad?" Lealand sounded patronizing, as through she were already his to play with.

"Oh," she tried to sound offhand, "we have so few of them in China."

That brought down the house. "The Princess thinks she can take a train home on a clipper." A drunken miner with his money on Lealand yelled, "The Senator will show you all about railroading when he gets his paws on your caboose."

Taking a last look at his cards, Lealand dashed off a note agreeing to sign over the railroad, tossing the paper on top of the contract. "There, no more bets. I'm calling you, because it does not matter. You cannot beat four kings and an ace." He started to lay his hand down face up.

"The lucky coon has four kings and an ace." Men licked their lips wondering what it was like to win $140,000 and a real Chinese Princess for your bed.

Four Kings and an ace. Boy Toy remembered Aaron saying that was an unbeatable hand in straight poker. Why had he dealt it to Lealand? Fear blew the last of the opium from her brain, leaving her sober and scared. Feeling she had done something horribly wrong, she flipped her cards over one at a time with a lacquered nail.

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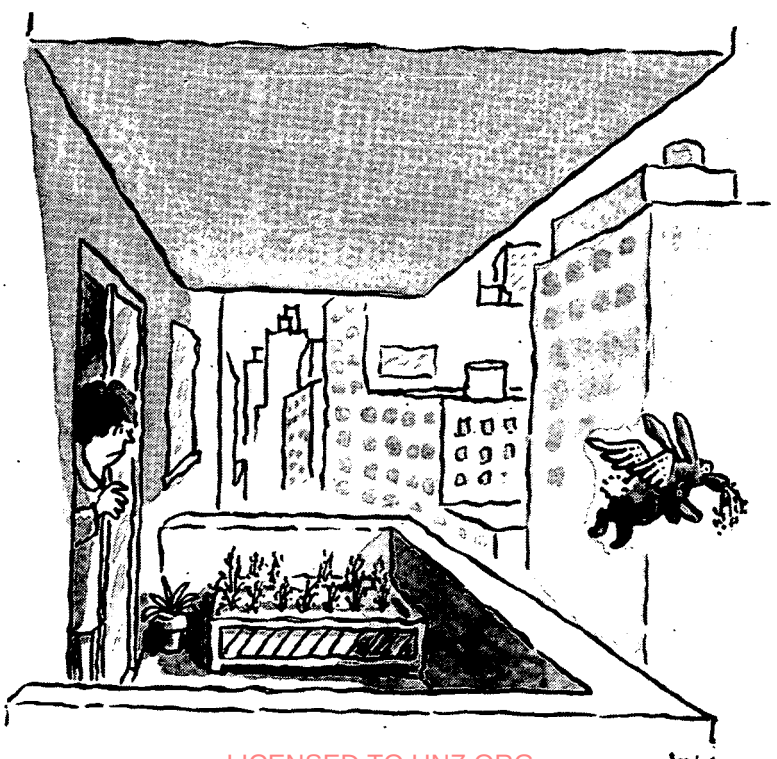
Faces peered over her shoulder to look at the losing hand. "Holy Christ, the Princess has got four aces." Boy Toy saw the four small cards in her hand were indeed all the same. Men fought their way forward to see two unbeatable hands. To see if there really were five aces in an El Dorado deck.

Lealand stared open mouthed at her cards, then back at his. Four kings stared up at him, but the fifth card was suddenly different.

"Ain't an ace, it's a four." The four of hearts lay next to his kings, a card whose corner looks so much like an ace.

Aaron leaned forward. "Seen several men make that mistake," he said as his big hands raked in the $140,000 in chips, Boy Toy's contract, and Lealand's railroad.

For the rest of his days Stanley Lealand swore he had seen an ace in his hand. Behind his back even his friends said, sure he had *seen* an ace, but when a man wants to win badly enough he will see things that just aren't there.



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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Nightfall, Isaac Asimov & Robert Silverberg, Doubleday, $19.95

Tales From Planet Earth, Arthur C. Clarke, Bantam, $9.95

WE ALL read it when we are at a relatively young age — I was 16 — and were impressed by it. I speak, of course, of Isaac Asimov's "Nightfall," the novelette, which, if you haven't read it, I feel sorry for you. And for you I will give a precis:

On a planet in another system, where the people are pretty much like you and me except that they have built up a civilization even faster than we have, it never gets dark because there are six suns, at least one of which is always in the sky. Unbeknownst to most inhabitants, once every 2000 years there is a total eclipse, which makes the stars appear, which causes just about everyone to go mad and burn everything, in an effort to stave off darkness and/or shut out the awful starlight, thus collapsing civilization, thus causing the planet to go through endless 2000 year cycles. The story concerns itself with the futile efforts of the knowledgeable inhabitants to save civilization; futile because even though they reason out that the eclipse must occur, and postulate even the appearance of a few stars, the actual reality is too great for their minds to encompass.

Almost as soon as you have read it, and been mightily impressed by it, certain logical if noncrucial objections occur. One by one, they get explained away, except for one: Is it the darkness, or is it the stars? But it's so good, you supress that.

I don't know exactly how many times I've re-read the story over the years — it's been a while since I was 16 — but it retains its power, and Asimov — who has written better, but has not struck that peculiar blend of power and memorability very often again — is stuck with being the author of "Nightfall." He wrote it so long ago, you see; toward the very beginning of his career, bent over a manual typewriter, in

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physical circumstances that must seem very straitened to him as he looks out his penthouse windows at Central Park now. Such a long time ago, and all the stories that have come since "Nightfall," and still people remember him first for it.

I can think of worse fates than to be Isaac Asimov. And to be the author of a story like "Nightfall," which is a landmark in a field that does not get many, and to have struck the peculiar blend of power and memorability which it is not given to most writers to strike at all; if out of, what is it, 500 books? he is known first as the author of "Nightfall" is a fact that occasionally galls, Christ, it's considerably better than being poked in the eye with a sharp stick.

Still, one can see how he would feel a certain bittersweetness. And now it has perhaps started all over again, with the publication of *Nightfall*, the novel.

Nightfall, the novel, is written in collaboration with Robert Silverberg, and I deliberately did not call up either Bob or Isaac to find out who did what, because you couldn't. What you can do is read the book to find out where the seams are — where the one hand took up and the other left off. And what you will find is that you can't tell. The thing is a whole, legitimately and seamlessly a novel, with the novelette rewritten and incorporated as the middle third, not the last third. *Nightfall* the novel stands by itself, just as "Nightfall" the novelette did.

It is not, in fact, a book that ends with the eclipse and the fires; it is, essentially, an after the disaster novel, although it has many other features.

But we'll get to that in a minute; I want to talk about Bob Silverberg first. Viz.: I don't know what's gotten into Bob, specifically, but this makes the second of these in a few months (the first being his novelette written as a companion piece to C.L. Moore's "Vintage Season," as published by Tor), and, once again, he's done a superb job. Once again, I don't see how he's going to make as much money out of this as he would devoting the same amount of time to doing his own work. So, once again, I have to assume it's because he couldn't resist. Granted, he's not exactly hurting for money, and he can probably afford it. But it makes me think about him in a way I'm not sure I've ever fully felt before; one is coincidence, but twice is something else again, and to not only do it but do it well. . . . Well, it's something; something nice.

Back to our story:

The novel begins with three principal characters: Sheerin, the psychologist; Siffera, the archeologist, and Beenay, the astrophysicist, who,

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all unbeknownst to each other, are grappling with different aspects of the same mystery.

Sheerin has been called in as a consultant to a theme park. After 2000 years, someone has for the first time gotten the idea of a tunnel of darkness ride, fifteen minutes in duration. Unfortunately, although the ride, newly opened, is a smash success, no one who undergoes it is not shaken, a few go permanently crazy, and a smaller but nonetheless real number just plain die. Sheerin spends some time interviewing survivors, in an insane asylum, and then takes the ride himself. Though he emerges essentially unscathed, he feels no doubt that the ride must be closed down permanently; people are not prepared to cope with darkness.

Siffera is in the midst of investigating Beklimot, the oldest known archeological dig on the planet, when she is caught in a horrendous sandstorm. When it passes, the nearby Hill of Thombo has been accidentally sliced open by the sand, and in it are at least seven city remains, each on top of the other, each separated from the others by a layer of charcoal, each layer of charcoal 2000 years less aged than the one below it.

Meanwhile, young Beenay is meticulously verifying, again and again, that there is something seriously wrong with the Theory of Universal Gravitation, which theory was recently announced to tumultuous applause by Athor, an emminent figure in science; in fact, the leading physicist of the day.

When Beenay tells his discovery to Theremon, the newsman, things start to unravel — or, rather, ravel. For Theremon has by coincidence arranged an interview with the Apostles of The Flame, a far-out religious cult which believes the planet is doomed to a 2000 year cycle in which it grows dark, the stars come out — whatever *they* are — and rain down fire to destroy the cities of Man. Which is due to happen in fourteen months. And although Theremon does not at first put things together, soon enough he is the thread that gathers in Beenay, Siffera, Sheerin, and Athor, who points out that Beenay's figures do not invalidate the Theory of Universal Gravitation; they point to the existence of a hitherto unknown astronomical body which will eclipse the one sun that will shine on a day fourteen months hence.

With this much information in their possession, and fourteen months to go until the big day, you would expect that something could be done. But, step by inevitable step, nothing is done, or what is done is pitifully inadequate. And

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the stars come out, in a scene in which they do not rain down fire, but the civilization destroys itself trying to build enough fires to drive away the darkness.

And then the survivors — the really few who have not gone hopelessly psychotic — must try to salvage . . . something. Which, in a way, they do; the book ends on a note of not exactly triumph, but at least human attainable hope.

But certain questions remain left over from "Nightfall."

Sheerin, for instance, through his story demonstrates that the people of the planet really can't stand darkness; darkness pitch black, darkness everywhere they look. There are certain logical objections to this, but they can be patched over; for instance, everyone, every time, has been sleeping with a "godlight," so that even though they draw the curtain in their bedchambers, it still isn't dark. And if you go into a mine, as these people must if they are going to support a technological society, or cave, of course you carry a light. Less easy to gloss over is the fact that mines, aplenty, must exist from previous epochs and be known to archeologists, but somehow that doesn't bother me. I am left, really, only with the central puzzle; is it the darkness *or* is it the stars? Because it can't be both.

I am already troubled that in this story the stars all pop out at the same time, whereas in a real eclipse you get the first magnitude stars coming out almost as soon as the eclipse is fairly begun, then the second magnitude, then the third, and so forth, until the full majesty of the night sky is revealed if it doesn't happen to be raining. And, mind you, that's in *our* sky; this planet on which this story is set is apparently in a cluster such that our own sky pales — well, no — in comparison.

Now, then. Do you mean to say these stars shed no light? Obviously, you can't say *that.* But how much light do they shed? Could it possibly be as much as is shed on Earth by a full Moon? *More!*

Do you, for that matter, mean to say that no one, in 2000 years, has looked up at the sky from a deep well and reported that the sky is not what it seems? And gotten considerable attention paid to him, if not the first time, and the first reporter, but the hundredth? And what about this sixth sun? It appears to be, really, a rather feeble vessel, if people's fingers and toes start to go numb because by itself it sheds so little warmth. And yet *none* of the stars, in this starry, starry sky, are strong enough to be visible even at that relatively low level of illumination?

No. No. No, despite the strong

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efforts of the collaborators to paper over the central logical fallacy, it remains. Now — does it matter? No.

This is a very good book. True, it is another in a long series of books that demonstrates the strongest ingredient in science fiction is not the science, but we already know that. The point that counts is whether you believe it while it is happening, and you do. And, most important, what might have been an exercise just in milking "Nightfall" for another round, is anything but. It's a pleasure.

Arthur C. Clarke's *Tales From Planet Earth* (introduction by Isaac Asimov), is a handsome trade paperback (a Byron Preiss Visual Production) illustrated by Michael Whelan, and apart from the fact that it is practically impossible to detect how much the store will charge you for it, is a very nice book.

Arthur C. Clarke is not as good a short story writer as he is a novelist, but most people have failed to detect that fact. Mind you, he is not a bad short story writer, and sometimes he is a great one, but it is also true that the routine Arthur C. Clarke short story is very routine. But, as I say, most people haven't tumbled to that fact.

There are 14 stories here, including "The Deep Range" and "The Lion of Comarre." I think you'll like this book. Though I doubt very much if you will like all the stories, that's not the point of a short story collection.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Fire, Alan Rodgers, (Bantam paper, 525pp)

ALAN RODGERS was the editor of the excellent magazine *Night City*, the pure-horror spin-off of *Twilight Zone*. The magazine was an artistic success and might have succeeded financially if its publisher had cared to put some real effort behind it. In the meantime, though, Rodgers made a strong contribution to the field of horror fiction — and when his magazine was killed, he responded, not by looking for another editorial job, but by plunging into his own writing.

The results are now in: it was a good career move. Alan Rodgers isn't an editor who writes, he's a writer who used to edit. Bantam seems to

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be behind his latest novel, *Fire*, in a big way — slick-covered advance reading copies, for instance, and a promise of a half-million-copy print run.

For once the hype is well-applied. The book clearly has what it takes to be a commercial success. More important to you, of course, is the fact that the book is better than it needs to be — so good, in fact, that it transcends its genre. It is no more a "horror novel" than say, Stephen King's *The Stand* — and the book bears comparison with that landmark novel in other ways, too.

Fire is a novel of apocalypse — literally. We've seen a lot of novels and movies that try to make the dark prophecies of St. John's *Revelation* come true in the modern world, but most of them merely exploit the obvious devices and miss the real power of the scriptural story. (Think of *The Omen* and you'll know exactly what I mean.) Rodgers, on the other hand, has a deep understanding of what the apocalyptic story is about, and also seems to understand how religious fanaticism works.

Fire begins in a research lab, where a scientist named Bonner has used gene-splicing — and more brutal procedures — to create the beast of apocalypse. In the same lab, Luke Munsen has been trying to create a bacterium that decodes and restores DNA of dead creatures so that tissues from fossils can be grown and studied. To Luke's surprise, the bacterium he ends up with can do a great deal more than grow tissues. In fact, it is so powerful that once it is loosed in the world it brings about a literal Resurrection Day: the graves open, and the dead come up again into the world.

For a long way into the book it seems to be pure science fiction, but that is not what Rodgers is about. He has no particular fear of genre boundaries, and uses whatever devices seem appropriate in order to tell a deep, compelling story. There is an inescapable element of mysticism woven into the plot, but it is, if such a thing were possible, a kind of clear-headed mysticism where everything makes sense. Best of all, the characters are real, not just stereotypes running through their obligatory paces in a disaster novel. They aren't merely "interesting." They're truthful and funny and beautiful by turns, and their pain is exquisite and real.

Rodgers also avoids the storytelling mistake that ruined the ending of *The Stand* for me. King relied on good Calvinist theology when his novel ended with all the struggles of human characters amounting to nothing, so that only the finger of God could save the world from the Walking Man. However, I, for

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one, found that to be infuriating. If God was going to solve everything all by himself, why did I spend so much time reading seven billion pages about the suffering and accomplishments of the human characters? Rodgers's ending, by contrast — though there is an element of divine aid that will annoy diehard agnostics — arises from the choices and actions of the good and semi-good people whose lives we have been following.

This is not one of those cheap bloody post-King horror novels in which the writer tries to stimulate your gag reflex at every opportunity. This is a *real* story, full of life in the midst of death, magnanimity in the midst of cruelty, creation in the midst of devastation. Those other guys know horror. Rodgers knows humanity.

If there's any justice in this world, then half a million copies of this book won't be enough.

The Fairy Rebel, Lynne Reid Banks (Doubleday, cloth, 125pp, $12.95)

Do children read or hear stories about fairies and elves anymore? There was an overwhelming movement among pinheaded educators back in the 1950s and 1960s to remove all fantasy from children's literature, at least in the schools, and for a time it seemed that book publishers largely went along — after all, why publish a children's book that no school library is going to buy?

But the pendulum is swinging back. Even the most theory-ridden children's educators are beginning to notice the fact that children — like everyone else — won't read if they don't enjoy the books they're given (it will take another fifty years for college professors to notice this, of course). And many children *do* love stories that are filled with magical, impossible things.

Such a book is *the Fairy Rebel* by Lynne Reid Banks. The author of *The Indian in the Cupboard*, Banks spins a wonderful story that covers two generations in only a few pages, and that plunges us into a revolution of fairies trying to get free of oppression of an orwellian fairy queen. Some of what happens is funny, some is scary; and I suspect the story would be as successful if read aloud to a four-year-old as it is when a ten-year-old — or fifteen-year-old — reads it alone.

I wonder, though, if today's American children will catch the humor that arises from Banks's subversion of the fairy-tale genre. I suspect most will not, but then, the story is good enough that, like most good satires, it will probably help revive the very conventions that it satirizes. American boys are more

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NOVEMBER HARDCOVER

TAFFORD

PIERS ANTHONY/ROBERTO FUENTES

#048197 lives in the last city on earth, a grim underground world of the post holocaust 25th century, where even sex is controlled by the state.

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likely to be put off by the word *fairy* itself, which is used here without apology. That alone probably assures an almost all-female readership, and that's a shame — half the audience that would enjoy this wonderful book will be cut off because a redolent old word has been co-opted as a term of denigration and ridicule.

But maybe, even as fairies are making a comeback in literature, the gay rights movement will succeed in stopping people from using the word *fairy* (among others) as a term of abuse. You can do your part in *both* endeavers by reading this book aloud or handing it to the children that you know. Once they've seen thumb-sized Tiki defiantly wearing blue jeans and her boyfriend Wijic gorging himself on buttered toast, the word *fairy* might be rooted firmly enough with a positive meaning that they'll resent and resist its use in negative ways.

And in the meantime, they'll have read a story with far more power than its length and humor might suggest.

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John Maddox Roberts' inventive new story might be described as vanity fair SF, in that it concerns a woman in pursuit of a new high in idle pleasures: sportswear that lives . . .

Skinsuit

By John Maddox Roberts

GLORIA COULD TELL right away that it was going to be one of Jewel's better parties. Of course, since these were social rather than diplomatic functions, it wasn't unusual to see officially unofficial representatives of countries that didn't recognize one another talking amicably. Still, already she'd seen the ambassadors of all three Chinas chattering away just as if they weren't fighting a war all over East Asia. And over in the corner, there was the Irish ambassador talking to the Duke of York, and *those* two hadn't acknowledged one another in twelve years. Evidently this Sheess ambassador thing was more important than old rivalries.

Jewel came plowing through the glittering crowd toward Gloria, pearls and sapphires dripping from her every pore, waving her fat arms. "Gloria, love, isn't this the most beautiful crowd you've ever seen? If I could get them all drunk enough, we could have world peace before midnight! Now, come with me and meet the Sheess ambassador. He's the most charming — ah, *creature*."

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She thrust a bejeweled arm through Gloria's and steered her among the mighty, the wealthy, and those who merely aspired to both. Keeping up her hostess chatter, Jewel eyed Gloria's outfit: a transparent body stocking covered with a net of fine gold chain, with tiny rubies at the interstices.

"Stunning rig, dear," she said. "Gold and rubies do so well suit you tanned, tawny blonde types."

"Stefan designed it for me," Gloria said complacently.

"It'll make you the hit of the season. Ah, there's the ambassador. Now" — she dropped her penetrating voice and continued sotto voce — "don't be put off by his appearance. He's quite civilized and even something of a wit. Striking creature, really, if it just weren't for that nose."

The ambassador was a biped, tall and thin, his rather short torso balanced on legs with knobby knees that were larger than his thighs. His long arms gestured gracefully as he spoke. He turned to face his approaching hostess and her guest. The small, hairless head had two eyes in the usual location, and a wide, lipless mouth. He would have seemed almost human except for the nose. It was triangular and spread over half the face, its surface made up of a convoluted mass of thin, quivering membranes. He looked, Gloria thought, very much like a leaf-nosed bat.

"Your Excellency," Jewel hooted, "allow me to present Miss Gloria Norstead, daughter of Paxton Norstead. Gloria, His Excellency Prince Ziskish, Ambassador of the Sheess Empire." Gloria curtsied, and from her temporarily lowered position, noted that the ambassador's slick, bare, charcoal-gray skin betrayed no sign of external genitalia.

"Most charmed, I am sure." Ziskish's lips parted in a V-shaped smile, baring two rows of thin, delicate-looking, needle-like teeth, the front ones at least two inches long.

Jewel turned to the two men who had been talking to the ambassador: a tall Sikh and a Space Corps officer in full-dress uniform. "Gloria, of course you already know Secretary-General Ranjit Singh, and this is Captain Douglas of the *Fram*." She knew who Douglas was, naturally. His picture was everywhere these days, the man who had commanded the *Fram* expedition that secured the peace with the Sheess.

"I hope I'm not interrupting important negotiations, gentlemen," Gloria said, smiling to give them full benefit of her dimples.

"Not at all, Miss Norstead. His excellency has been telling us something of the evolution of his species," said the U.N. secretary-general.

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"How fascinating! Please don't let me interrupt." Gloria said the words automatically, as she had said them before at a hundred other such functions.

"I was just getting to our arboreal stage, Miss Norstead," said Ziskish. "For millions of years, my ancestors lived in trees, just as your did, but we were gliders." He raised an arm to display a thin flap of skin stretching between his armpit and his side. "These vestigal membranes are all we have left from our tree-dwelling days. Those, and binocular vision, of course."

"And what did you — glide about in search of?" asked Gloria, not very interested. Scientific discussions always bored her, but these were three *very* important people, and if they wanted to talk about these things, she'd listen.

"Small flying creatures of a lower order of evolution, mostly. In your terms, my ancestors were insectivores." Gloria had a sudden nauseating vision of those needle teeth biting a cockroach in two. "We have, of course," continued Zishkish, "progressed somewhat since then." He selected a canapé from a tray offered by a passing waiter, and his long, thin fingers popped it into his mouth. During the gesture his eyes never left Gloria. Her stomach lurched slightly. The ambassador had chosen a concoction of pâté and caviar artfully sculpted into the likeness of a scarab.

"Oh dear," squawked Jewel, her hand going to the diamond-studded receiver in her ear, "there's Princess Fatima arriving. I'm afraid I must leave you briefly." She swept away, bangles clashing.

"I feel, Secretary-General," said Ziskish, "that I am monopolizing a great deal of attention that should go to Captain Douglas here. After all, his expedition cleared up the unfortunate, ah, misunderstanding between our two species, and prevented further tragedy."

"Service officers are commonplace," said Douglas. "The arrival of the first nonhuman ambassador is an event unique in history."

"You are far too modest, Captain," said Ranjit Singh. "After all —" But Gloria's attention was elsewhere. Here came Jewel, and with her was Princess Fatima, and the bitch was wearing a creation identical to Gloria's, but in silver chain with amethysts. I'll kill that bungler Stefan, she thought. He's let a spy into his salon. If we're photographed together, the picture will be all over the social pages tomorrow! Her face flushed scarlet as she pictured herself the laughingstock of the season. Embarrassed and flustered, she hurriedly excused herself and fled the room.

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Out on the terrace, she greeted the usual crowd of people who, like her, would be seen nowhere else on this particular night. She found herself cornered against the terrace rail by a bearded scientific type, here only because he'd been aboard the *Fram*. He puffed a pipe and tried to look worldly as he nattered on. "They're quite informative in some ways, Miss Norstead; they've told us a lot about their evolution, and we know they're omnivores, like us, but we know nothing at all about their life cycle, not even how they reproduce; they just clam up when we ask them, and" Gloria feared that he wouldn't end the sentence before she died of boredom, but he was interrupted. She looked up and saw that they'd been joined by Captain Douglas.

"I see you've met Miss Norstead, Carruthers," said Douglas.

"Oh, of course, of course. We've been having a fascinating talk, really, but I must be going." Carruthers was weaving a bit. "Miss Norstead, please tell your father how very, very grateful I am that he made it possible for me to go on the *Fram*. Captain, it was the experience of a lifetime to be on your crew." After shaking Douglas's hand, Carruthers sweated his way back inside.

Douglas smiled after him. "I'm afraid the atmosphere here is a little heady for poor Carruthers. He's a lab rat by nature."

"He's a tedious little man, but Daddy dotes on him. Says he's one of the world's foremost biochemists."

"Daddy?" Douglas cocked an eyebrow. "Norstead Chemicals?"

"The very same." She gave Douglas her best smile and looked him over. He seemed awfully young to be so important, and he was good-looking and tall enough to make the uniform imposing. Ordinarily, she didn't like uniforms, and the dress sword was awfully theatrical, but the pearl-gray cape was *very* becoming on a tall man.

"So that's how you get invited to these things. May I get you a drink?"

"I'd love one. Yes, they have to invite me. Daddy's contributed heavily to the campaigns of every successful candidate since Roosevelt, I think." She loosed a tinkling laugh and turned to rest her forearms on the railing. Down below, a group of people were gathered around the pool. They were either too loud or silently intimidated and obviously didn't belong. When Douglas returned with her drink, she asked if he knew who they were.

"They're my crew," he said, running a commander's critical eye over the group. "Our hostess invited all the enlisted personnel to the lawn party,

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and I'm letting them come over in batches to keep things from getting too boisterous." He glanced at his watch and stood up very straight. She knew then that he was going to ask to see her home. Annapolis, West Point, Colorado Springs, Sandhurst, St. Cyr; it didn't matter — they all stood up so straight before asking her out.

"I have to go see those three Chinese ambassadors now — all three, at the same time, or two will be mortally insulted. If you don't have other plans, I'd be honored if you'd let me escort you home when this thing is over."

"I'd be delighted, Captain."

"Doug."

"Doug, then. It's — too hot to go back in there; I'll be touring the grounds somewhere." Damned if *she'd* be seen next to that Fatima bitch and her silver-net bodysuit.

It was getting late by the time Gloria made her way around to the pool. Most of the Space Service crew people had left, she was glad to note. One young man was splashing about in the pool, and two others watched him from the side. At first Gloria thought the boy was naked; then she saw that he was wearing a pale-gray bodysuit of the thinnest material she'd ever seen. The other two servicemen wandered away, and Gloria sauntered to poolside. The young spaceman — she decided he couldn't be more than eighteen — surfaced, blowing spray and flinging long blond hair back from his face. He grinned as he caught sight of Gloria.

"How's the water?" she asked, dipping a hand in. The touch of the water was an icy shock. "My God! You must be freezing. It isn't heated."

"I'm fine," the boy said. Placing his palms against the rim of the pool, he boosted himself out of the water and stood in one fluid motion. Droplets clung to his hair and face, but drained from the coverall so quickly that it seemed an optical illusion. The thin material delineated every outline so precisely that the boy might as well have been nude. Gloria gave the prospect close attention. He had a lovely body. For a moment she regretted accepting Doug's invitation. This young Apollo seemed far more interesting than some military-academy product. He'd be less formal and stiff. She giggled at the double entendre she'd been thinking.

"What do you call that skinsuit?" she asked, to cover the laugh. "I've never seen anything like it."

"I don't know what to call it, to tell the truth." The boy wrung some

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water from his hair. "Actually, I'm not even supposed to be wearing it. I picked it up on the expedition from a Sheess merchant, but some outfit from the trade concession got the monopoly on them, and they don't want any of us that picked them up to wear them in public. I guess they want to get an advertising campaign going. Anyhow, I had it on under my civvies, and when I saw this pool, I couldn't resist. You don't feel cold in one of these, and I hadn't seen a pool in almost a year."

"Really? May I touch it?" She ran her tongue briefly across her lips and, with a fingertip, traced the line of his deltoid and biceps. It felt like skin, only much smoother, without even the slight roughness of pores and hairs. "If it's so warm, how can you bear to wear it under your clothes?"

"Oh, it doesn't get hot." He ran his hand in absent, rhythmic circles over his muscular chest. "It keeps your body at optimum temperature at all times. Actually, it feels like wearing nothing at all. Sometimes I just forget to take it off for days." His eyes were dreamy, and his hand continued its abstracted motion. Suddenly he popped to attention as a voice came from behind Gloria.

"Halford! Get some clothes on. Quite aside from our agreement with Eckert's, you look indecent. I won't have my personnel running around in public like that. Now, get dressed and get back to your quarters."

"Yessir!" the boy said. As he walked away, Gloria studied his gray-sheathed buttocks. Surely no earthly material could fit so closely. She thought how nice a suit like that would be for skiing, instead of all those layers of clothing. Nils had complimented her on the way her behind looked in tight ski pants. Suppose she showed up in one of those!

"I hope he wasn't bothering you," said Doug, looking after the retreating figure. "Halford's a good boy, but he's been acting a little odd lately. Maybe I should send him over to Psych."

"Oh no, I enjoyed talking with him. Except for you and Ziskish, he's the only one here who hasn't bored me. Well, shall we go?" With his arm through hers, she returned to the ballroom, but she wouldn't descend the outside stairs to the waiting photographers until she was sure that Fatima had already left.

The cab left Gloria at the address that the man from Eckert's had given her over the phone. The building was new and in the best part of town. There was no display window, just a discreet brass plate by the door pro-

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claiming: "Eckert & Eckert, Importers." Engraved below were two royal patents, "by appointment to," etc.

The door opened automatically, and a salesman hurried up to greet her. "Ah, Miss Norstead, we're so delighted to have you visit us! A real honor, truly." He didn't exactly roll out a red carpet and kiss the hem of her gown, but the impression was the same.

"I just had to come when I found out that Eckert's would be handling the Sheess trade. Mr. Eckert was so kind to let me see the collection."

"Well, ordinarily our policy has been to maintain strict secrecy until the government has run all its tests and issued its licenses, and then, of course, the publicity people have to plan their campaigns, but for you, Miss Norstead, exceptions can always be made." He favored her with a fawning smile. "Now, would you care to see some of the art objects? They're still in a stockroom, not properly displayed at all, but many of them are stunning, just stunning."

"Of course, I'd love to see those," said Gloria, who knew even less about art than about science, "but I feel I should do it when I can devote proper time to them. I'm really on a very short schedule —"

"Oh, that's unfortunate. Well, we have some striking furniture, textiles, a number of lovely houseplants — though they'll be in quarantine for five more months — and some marvelous perfumes. The Sheess are very fond of scents, as who wouldn't be with noses like that." He giggled at his wit.

"You mentioned textiles. Actually, I already had something in mind when I called Mr. Eckert. You probably know that I'm fond of sports: mountain climbing and skiing and such. There's a — rumor that you've brought back some new kind of body suit that's absolutely weatherproof. Could I see one?"

"Oh dear," said the salesman. "I'm afraid there's been an information leak somewhere. That was supposed to be an absolutely top-secret item. Well, nothing to be done about it, I suppose. If you'll wait here just a moment." He slid away into a back room and returned with a box that seemed much too small for Gloria's expectations. Putting the box on a teak table, he lifted the lid reverently. Inside was a mass that looked like wrinkled gray silk.

Gloria lifted the thing with the tips of her fingers. It seemed to weigh nothing. There was a shapeless sack, from which dangled four thin tubes.

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Arms and legs? The whole thing was less than ten inches long. "It's much too small," Gloria said at length.

"Oh no, 'one size fits all,' as they say. It fits a six-foot, five-inch man as well as the tiniest infant. It has many unique properties besides maintaining body temperature."

"And what might those be?"

"Well, ordinarily it covers the body to collarbone, wrists, and ankles, but in very cold weather, it grows to cover the hands, feet, and neck."

"Grows?" said Gloria, aghast. "You mean it's alive?"

"Not alive, really," protested the salesman, "but our scientific people think the material shares some properties with living matter. It seems to metabolize" — he caught Gloria's blank expression — "er, eat, one might say, various bodily wastes and by-products. Perspiration, for instance; dead skin cells; even" — his voice dropped slightly in embarrassment —"urine and feces can be voided without removing the suit. And when the suit *is* removed, the wearer is as clean as if he had just taken a shower."

"It does sound like ideal sportwear," Gloria observed.

"Er, yes. Actually, the military has shown great interest in them. Within a year every soldier on this planet could be wearing them." Gloria found her interest dimming at the prospect of wearing the equivalent of army fatigues. "Of course," the salesman added hastily, "if you decide to take it, you may be the only person wearing one for months and months.' Her interest recovered.

"And," he went on, "they seem to be bulletproof and flameproof."

"Are you serious?" she asked.

"Oh, indeed. I would never joke about this firm's products. So, as you might imagine, all prominent political figures will be demanding them." Gloria warmed to the thought of having one before Fatima or her fat sultan of a husband.

"I'll take it," she said. "Here, don't bother to wrap it." She grabbed the box as if to keep it from escaping.

"Wonderful. Ah, Miss Norstead, we haven't discussed price yet. I'm sure you'll understand that, as this will, in effect, be our premier model, the cost will be, shall we say, rather steep."

"Oh yes, I suppose so. Well, just bill Paxton Norstead. Daddy'll never notice." Clutching the box, she rushed out the door to her waiting cab.

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* * *

IN HER apartment she studied her purchase. It was difficult to associate the wrinkled mass with the sleek, beautiful garment she'd seen the boy from the *Fram* wearing. Well, nothing to do but try it on. Quickly, with a sort of anticipatory tingle, she slipped out of her clothes.

Quick study showed that there was no way to get into the thing except through the neckhole. She thrust her fingers into the opening and spread them. It opened easily. There seemed to be no difference between front and back. She slid a foot into the sack and pushed it toward a leg tube. The fabric expanded without protest, and conformed quickly to the shape of her calf. Her foot popped out through the opening at the bottom of the leg, but the part around her ankle clung and would go no higher. The other leg went in as easily. She sucked her stomach in and pulled it up around her waist. No difficulties so far. She forced a hand down through an arm tube and out the opening at the wrist, then repeated the action with the other hand. Dipping her shoulders alternately, she shrugged the rest of the way into the bodysuit and stood up. There was a brief, oddly delicious slithering sensation as the thing seemed to settle itself and accommodate its fabric to her curves and crevices. Then it felt as if she were wearing nothing.

She went to the full-length, triple mirror to assess the effect. As with the boy at Jewel's party, she looked shaved and painted. Unfortunately, she knew that she would not be able to wear it alone in public, as he had. The teensy sag of her breasts showed, as did the slight rondure below her navel that all the thousands spent at the reducing clinic on Majorca had not been able to eradicate. And there was the excess width at the bottom of her fanny that was just going to cry out for surgery in a few years. It seemed so unfair that a woman began to deteriorate so early while men could stay so gorgeous for so long. That she was, at twenty-nine, considered one of the dozen or so most beautiful women in the world (which meant on the social circuit) didn't help.

The phone buzzer interrupted her self-appraisal. As she crossed to the instrument, she noticed an odd sensation. After puzzling a moment, she decided that it was because the suit's material nearly eliminated the friction of her thighs rubbing together as she walked. It was the same where her arms rubbed against her sides. The sensation was of a freedom of movement that surpassed nudity.

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Doug was on the other end. She fought down a momentary annoyance. She had classed him as something of a bore. But he was *so* presentable, and one of the best-known men in the world, at least for this season. "Doug! How lovely to hear from you!"

"Gloria, I just got loose from the parties and lectures and rallies for a few days, and I'm dying to get away. Are you free?"

"No appointments until Friday. I have a fitting at Gaudi's then."

"Great! What do you like to do?"

"Do you ski, sail, surf, mountain-climb?"

"Outdoor girl, eh? Sure, I ski some. How about Zurich?"

She thought for a moment. Nobody ever went to Zurich. There'd be nobody to see them there. Nobody who counted, anyway.

"How about the Cherry Blossom Ski Lodge on Hokkaido? I have an open invitation."

"Splendid. I'll make reservations with Pan—"

"Don't bother," she interrupted. "Just meet me at the 'port. I keep a season ticket with all the lines. We'll find something."

Hokkaido had been perfect. Everybody had been there, and they'd all marveled that she was skiing in just her Gaudi stretch pants and Sevres spring blouse that she'd bribed Sevres fabulously to let her have six weeks before the spring showing. She'd skied as never before, and had looked fabulous next to the others in their padded pants and bulky sweaters.

And Doug had been nice, too. Showing up with the famous explorer had netted her something of a coup, and well worth the effort, even though everybody wanted to talk to him about space exploration and Human-Sheess relations and other things that bored her silly. It had been with a sense of regret that she had peeled off her suit for their nightly lovemaking sessions, at which Doug had proved to be about what she expected: plodding and earnest, with a sort of workmanlike competence, but no flair or imagination. A sudden thought struck her: if the suit didn't have to be removed for even the most basic bodily functions, maybe even that, too — she'd get Miguel to experiment with her next time she saw him. Miguel would try *anything*.

She walked over to the triple mirror to see if the suit was showing any signs of wear. Halfway through her inspection, she noticed a tiny difference. She studied the lower edge of her bustline. The crease was no longer

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there. She looked farther down. Her belly was nearly concave. Trying to fight down her growing elation, she turned slightly. The lower curve of her buttocks joined the top of her thigh without the faintest hint of crease or wrinkle. It was impossible. Four days of skiing simply *couldn't* have given her back her nineteen-year-old figure. She pulled down the upper half of the bodysuit. The fabric peeled away slowly, as if reluctant to leave. Her breasts, freed of the suit, resumed their customary faint droop. She pulled the suit back up. The droop disappeared.

She sat in a chair and tried to think. What had that man at Eckert's told her about the suit? It was sort of alive somehow, and it lived on dead skin and such. Did that make it a parasite? No, it wasn't doing any harm. There was another word. She tried to remember long-past college classes. Symbolist? No. Symbiote! That was it! And if it was a symbiote, it would try to keep her, its host (hostess?), in top condition.

But, then, she reflected, my body's just the same; it only makes me *look* younger. Still, just looking so good makes me *feel* a lot better. And if what the man at Eckert's said is true, I don't have to take it off for weeks or months. Maybe not *ever!* She checked the date. She would try it for a month.

THE CAMP at the foot of K-2 was almost deserted at the end of the season. At least, the management called it a "camp" despite its lavish hotels and lodges and the four-star restaurants with Sherpa waiters in colorful native costumes. The parties of the fabulously wealthy who played mountain climber in heavily escorted groups — with hot meals flown in ahead of them to the camps at the end of each day's leisurely hike over easy trails that were kept under constant, if discreet, TV surveillance — had departed.

With winter closing in, only the serious climbers remained. In the best restaurants, Gloria admired the matchless view of Himalayan peaks. For reasons she couldn't explain, she had stayed after all the best people had left. She had an urge to try her skill on a real climb, something she hadn't done in years. It was so strange to be here alone, but somehow she didn't mind. She attacked her third lobster dinner of the week. Most of the others had been crab or shrimp or prawns. She'd developed a craving for shellfish lately.

She had proved to be the hit of the season when she showed up at

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Papandriou's party dressed in nothing but the skinsuit and silver boots from Yoritomo's. Everyone had demanded the name of her designer, and the other women had just turned *green!* And for the first time since she was twenty-five, she had felt no insecurity in the presence of younger women.

When she had run into Miguel at Prince Reynaldo's party and had gotten him alone, she'd asked him if he'd like to try something a little different, and, of course, Miguel was *always* game for something a little different. When she'd proposed her little experiment, he'd joked that this was some new kind of fetish, but he'd give it try. And sure enough, he'd just had to push a little, and there he was! He said later that it was the damnedest sensation, but it was certainly one accommodating garment. She hadn't had it off in nearly four months now, and she'd never felt better in her life. Sometimes she wondered whether the hotel maids ever marveled at the always pristine condition of her bathrooms.

Which climbing group to choose? There were several expeditions planned for assaults on the peak, with some famous climbers leading them, and a few were going to try Everest, though those were always in danger of straying into territory held by one of the Chinese factions. She didn't want to be taken for a spy. Well, she'd sleep on the problem. Any of them would be overjoyed to have her along, naturally.

She woke with full moon lighting the terrace outside her suite. What time was it? The clock on the table said two. She was wide awake. She slid from between the sheets and walked out onto the terrace. When she hit the cold air, there was a crawling sensation as the suit grew to cover her hands and feet, and climbed her neck and over her face to her hairline, leaving openings only at mouth, eyes, and nostrils. It had never grown to protect her so quickly or so extensively. She felt as comfortable as if she were on the beach at Cannes in summer.

It was time to do something mad and daring. Something like a moonlight climb by herself. She pictured the shocked looks on everybody's face when she returned in the morning after an all-night trek. She hurried back into her room to gather her gear before she lost her nerve. She would need no clothes beside the skinsuit, of course, but she put on her helmet and climbing boots and her tool belt with its pick and pitons, and she looped some rope around her tiny waist. She wouldn't be getting high enough in

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one night for a respirator. When all was ready, she went back out onto the terrace and jumped down the four or five feet to the snow below. She looked around to make sure nobody had seen her, then she took the trail for the beginner's slope. It wouldn't be prudent to try anything rougher. Going alone and at night was insane enough as it was. Before she reached the bottom of the beginner's slope, she noticed a steep, rocky, but still negotiable, trail leading off the main one. On an impulse, as she'd been doing everything tonight, she took the trail, carefully placing her feet on rocks that were bare of snow. After progressing a hundred yards or so, she looked back. The bright moonlight revealed no trace of her passage. Somehow it seemed terribly satisfying to be leaving no footprints.

Sunrise found her well up the slope. She had climbed without halt throughout the moonlit hours and still felt no fatigue. After all, she thought, why go back now, when she wasn't the slightest bit winded? Why not go on? Even her feet weren't sore. She was an experienced climber, though, so she sat on a rock and pulled off her boots to massage her feet. When she stood to take a look around, she felt the now-familiar crawling sensation as the suit took on a new conformation. It felt as if little balloons were being inflated beneath her feet, and she felt herself being pushed free of the ground. Quickly, she sat down and checked her feet. The suit had grown thick pads over the soles of her feet. They were at least an inch thick under the heels, maybe half that at the balls and toes. The soles were covered with swirly ridges, something like fingerprints. She got up again and walked around. It was far more comfortable than wearing boots.

On a hunch, she took off her helmet and took the pins out of her hair. Holding her hair bunched flat against her head, she felt the skinsuit crawl up until her hair was covered with a smooth cap. She left the boots and helmet where they were. She'd pick them up when she came back, maybe. Wearing only the skinsuit and her tool belt, she continued her climb.

It was almost sundown when she stopped again. The intervening hours had passed in a sort of happy daze. She felt infinitely powerful, immune to the forces of nature. Something had been bothering her, though; what was it? Oh yes. It was the pads that had appeared beneath her feet. Each pad seemed to be more massive than the whole original skinsuit had been,

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before she'd put it on. Where had the extra mass come from? It seemed to her that that shouldn't happen. Something one of Daddy's scientists had said to her when she was little and asked if the orchids on the trees in the garden just grew out of thin air. He'd said something about conservation of mass, and material can't just appear out of nowhere. So where had the new soles come from? She seemed to remember a slight stirring in her bowels when they'd formed, but *that* couldn't have anything to do with it.

Her attention was distracted by a caterpillar or grub or something crawling on the rock beside her. She picked it up. Strange to see a life-form this high up. Maybe she'd discovered something new to science. Not quite on a par with the Abominable Snowman, though. She debated whether to take it back with her, but decided not to bother. Instead of putting it down, she absentmindedly raised it to her mouth and bit into it.

After the bitter taste, she snapped out of her daze and spat out the remains. She fell to hands and knees, retching. She shook her head, then scrubbed her mouth with snow. What had possessed her to do something so disgusting? The lack of oxygen must be making her light-headed. She hadn't eaten since yesterday, and maybe she was hungry without noticing. Enough of this. Time to go back down.

She got to her feet and continued her climb.

What day was it? She'd lost track. She knew there was something terribly wrong with her. She'd been climbing for days now without sleep or food. She must be near the peak, but that wasn't possible. Nobody had ever climbed K-2 alone, without even oxygen equipment. She knew she had to be dying of slow starvation. The sense of being as strong as ever must be illusory. She could see that her arms and legs were showing signs of emaciation. Her thighs were getting thinner than her knees. Still, she felt the compulsion to climb.

Just below the crest, she found the ice cliff. It was situated in a narrow gorge, just like a miniature glacier. When she saw it, she ceased climbing and began to chop at the ice face with her pick. Her motions were entirely mechanical now, and even colors and smells seemed different somehow.

With unaccustomed efficiency, she chipped and dug her way into the ice. As she dug, the part of her mind that was still hers agonized. It had to be the suit. And what had the man from Eckert's said? *"Within a year, every soldier on this planet could be wearing them."* And *"all*

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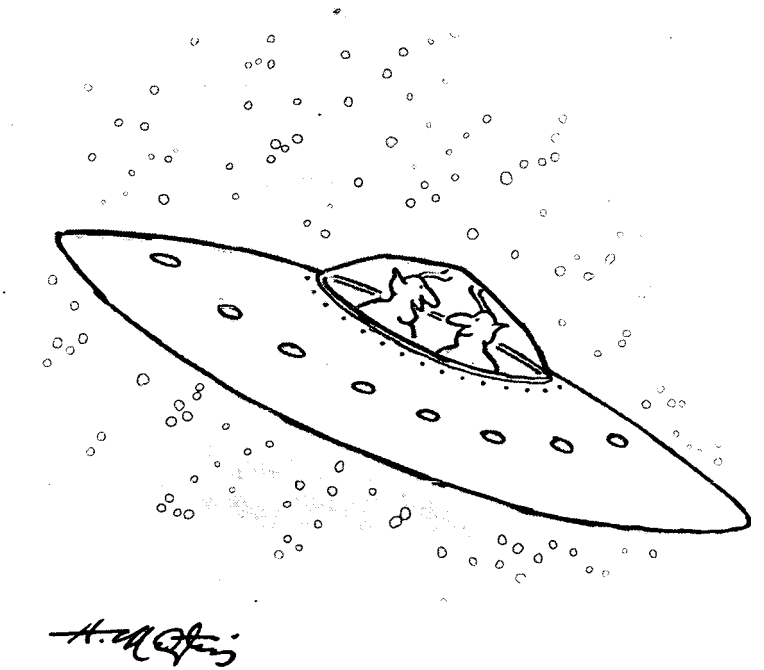
prominent political figures will be demanding them."

Inside the ice cave she had made, she shaped a ledge, then she blocked up the entrance except for a small hole. Then she set about smoothing the walls until they were glass-slick. In the last rays of sunlight before darkness, she saw her reflection in the ice wall. The gray skin that was now almost black, the horribly thin arms and legs. Worst of all, she saw the flat triangle that was beginning to spread across her face, a triangle full of thin, convoluted membranes.

She went to the ledge and sat on it, pulling up her big, knobby knees to her chin and wrapping her arms around her legs. She closed her eyes and began to scream. She screamed for a long time, until the skin grew to fill her mouth.



"The best time to buzz earth is between the hours of 5 and 7 P.M. - the so-called 'Happy Hour.'"

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Robert Reed's last story here was "Chaff," (May 1990). His new story is a very strange and compelling tale about a shooter and his victims.

Bushwhacker

By Robert Reed

1.

THERE'S FRESH-MOWED GRASS and a crisp wind from the northwest and a big, kidney-shaped area of gray gravel — swings and a wooden fort on the gravel, plus various elegant tire-and-steel structures begging to be climbed. Half a dozen varied-sized children are playing, racing and screaming and shooting at each other with pistols made from hands and sticks. I'm sitting on a long, hard park bench with a woman named Doris Drivens. Doris the divorced Drivens. Doris the pensive, lonely — and most certainly horny — Drivens, who seems to have taken a shine for yours truly. She's sitting so close that I can taste her perfume, and she talks. Talks, talks. "But you know, if I hadn't been named Doris like I was, if maybe I was a Susie or a Beth or anything better . . . like, say, Kristy, or Connie, or something like that? Something flashy and cute? I just think I would have turned out better. My life and everything. You know? I really, really do

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think names make a huge difference in a person's fate. Don't you?" She pauses for an instant, probably winded. Then she wonders, "What's your name, by the way? Did you tell me?"

"Tim," I lied.

"Tim," she repeats, nodding ferociously.

The children are playing inside the wooden fort. A certain boy, dark and cherubic, continues to catch my eye. He doesn't belong to Doris; hers are the two girls who whine and prance and seem forever a step behind in whatever game is being played. If I weren't short of ammunition, and if this weren't such a public place . . . well, I would probably consider all of the children as quarry. Children anywhere, at any time. That's the way I'd want it in the best of all possible worlds. I very much hate this game of which one or two are the most deserving.

"Tim?" says Doris. "I'm sorry, Tim. I guess I've been monopolizing the conversation, and I still don't know anything about you." She shows me a wispy smile, brittle and betraying deep-seated neuroses. "Except, of course, that you're a very pleasant man. So far as I can tell. And you certainly have looks—"

If the cherubic boy leaves, I tell myself, I'll excuse myself and follow him.

"—which I hope, pray, doesn't sound too forward of me to say. Tim, I just feel there are times in which a modern liberated woman needs to show a little more resolve and fortitude than her Stone Age ancestors and her mother did. If you know what I mean." She pauses. She blinks and then remembers to smile. "So?" she says. "How about your own self? I'm sure a looker such as you has just an *enormous* following among the ladies—"

I'm saved from the dribble by the children themselves.

A little redheaded boy catches something in my gaze, and he charges us with his left hand made into a pretend pistol. His thumb/hammer is cocked. His aim is quick and careless. "Bang!" he shouts. "Bang, bang, bang!"

"Argg!" I moan. I clasp both of my hands to my chest, slumping forward and feigning death. All of the children see me and enjoy my show. They approach en masse now, hands drawn and bullets blazing.

"Kids," snaps Doris. "Girls?"

I reach into my shirt pocket, withdrawing an apparent pen.

"Leave the adults alone," Doris is pleading. "Gladys! Gretchen! Mind your mother now, please!"

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I say, "Bang!" to hide the soft report of the pen. The trigger is a sophisticated set of presspads sensitive to my fingerprints and nothing else. The bullet — tiny and short-ranged and thoroughly painless — enters the cherubic boy beneath his sternum, dissolving in an instant. I see the familiar surprise come into his face, into his eyes, and he wobbles and falls to his butt without fanfare. The other children assume this is a bit of inspired comedy, of course. They giggle and howl, running in circles around their wounded member. Doris herself seem less enthralled. I can see the nervousness in her expression, and her frustration . . . and I can't help but feel sorry for the woman. I don't like her, no, and she's a lousy companion. But all of a sudden, I'm pitying her for her many limitations.

The cherubic boy rises now and runs, apparently normal.

The children follow him to the swings, and Doris says, "Anyway, where were we?" I lay the tip of the false pen against her right leg. Both of us hear the tiny *woosh* of compressed air. Doris feels the slender bullet in her meat, then in her blood, dissolving and flowing toward her dim little brain. Her eyes go watery for a long moment. I tell myself that she's deserving. I'm not wasting my precious ammunition, and if only *they* would send me enough so that I could inoculate every person in my hometown . . . the children and everyone. . . .

Doris gives a little sigh, then she brightens.

The cherubic boy, further along in the process, starts to wander away from his friends. He's staring straight into the crisp wind, concentrating on something or other, a true, hard, wise quality coming into his face.

And beyond the boy, standing alone against a large walnut tree, is a stranger, a tallish man wearing a long, heavy coat. Too much coat for this weather, I think. He seems to be watching me. No, I'm not mistaken. He acts as if he knows me or sees through me in some fashion, and my first instinct is to panic. But I resist. I breathe and rise from the park bench without haste, absolutely nothing abnormal in my manners. Nothing that any observer would find the slightest bit mysterious. Doris is placid; Doris is changing. I say, "Have a good day, Doris Drivens."

"And you, too, Tim."

I nod and start to turn.

Doris says, "Your name isn't Tim." A sudden revelation. "Is it? You were lying to me. Weren't you?"

"That's perceptive of you, Doris." I admit, "I was lying. You're quite right."

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She shrugs. Suddenly small fibs don't seem so important.

I say, "So long."

"Good-bye.

And I retreat. The man beside the walnut tree continues watching me, just me, as I move toward my car. But when I'm driving, taking the winding road out of the park, I come past that same tree and see nobody. No man, or anyone. He has vanished, I think, or he never was.

2.

MY AMMUNITION arrives in the most novel ways.

I can never predict the means. One day there's an ordinary package, brown and taped and boxed with white string, set against my front door; another day, and someone, or something, throws a bundle through an open upstairs window. Not all that unusual, you say? Then how about the time a mourning dove perched on the wooden rail of my porch, me not ten feet away, and it pooped and then lifted, suddenly gone. In its bright white shit were the tiny bullets, needle-shaped and unexpected. My ammunition, yes. And then there was the evening — just last month, in fact — when an ordinary rat surfaced in my downstairs toilet, soaked and repulsive, but sporting a collar on which was fastened a plastic waterproof pouch and five new bullets ready to use.

I don't have any idea who supplies the bullets. None.

What little I do know is based more on surmising than on anything concrete. For instance, the packages arrive infrequently in the best of times, and I'm often without any bullets for long stretches. Hence, I've concluded two things. First, the manufacture of these wondrous tools is difficult, or at least difficult under present circumstances. And second, there are credible reasons for keeping my noble work secret from the world at large. Hence subterfuge. Hence an ugly sewer rat in my toilet, and me beating it to death with a broomstick handle.

This whole business began a little more than two years ago.

I had taken an extended vacation — overseas and alone — and when I returned home, I discovered an anonymous suitcase set on my coffee table, waiting for me. It seemed thoroughly ordinary, not new and not old, but inside were some dozen peculiar air-powered guns. Like my pen, for instance. And a stiff fishing rod and a wooden walking cane, too. I suppose

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it sounds silly, my possessing a pair of dress shoes with a barrel hidden in the sole of the right shoe, the trigger tripped by certain motions of my toes. But, as the cliché states, the shoes fit me. Everything fits me. Even the walking cane — I have a bad hip from a football injury — would be the sort of cane I would purchase for myself and use on my sorest days.

These are intricate, sophisticated instruments.

I do remember a vague sense of surprise at finding the suitcase, but then the feeling faded. There was no sign of a forced entry anywhere in my house. I checked windows and doors before popping the latches, and then I pulled out the camouflaged guns and played with them, one after another, mastering their breeches and triggers in quick succession, some potent hidden instinct coming into play.

Of course I can guess what must have happened.

While traveling through distant lands, alone, I was most definitely *prepared*. I don't know the means. I don't know which of the thousands of strangers was responsible, or which country was the site. All I know is that I came home ready for my task. Some part of me had expected the new equipment, no explanation required, and when my surprise faded, I could only feel a growing sense of enthusiasm.

The bullets themselves were hidden inside a pocket inside the suitcase — seventeen slender darts with the cold feel of ice, and the color of ice, and a faint, clean, chemical smell.

I used one bullet on my first hunt that very afternoon.

I was sitting on the front porch of my house, on my old-fashioned swing, holding the long walking cane with its tip resting on the wooden rail. Length meant accuracy, I sensed. My target was a certain neighbor lady, large and slow — a notorious local alcoholic without family or friends. A safe target, I judged. In case my instincts proved wrong, and she was injured somehow. I can recall everything about the moment. I can feel the cane in my hands, perfect for my hands, and me holding myself steady with my legs and aiming and squeezing once while the poor woman staggered past my house. The *woosh* seemed loud. I nervously expected people to come outdoors, startled and curious. But the woman herself seemed indifferent. She stopped walking, took a deep, wet breath, then continued. I couldn't have missed such a sluggish target, I judged. Yet her gait and her drunken face seemed constant, and I wondered what had I done.

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My instincts told me, "Wait," and I mistrusted them for the first and last time.

I did no more hunting for a time.

But then the woman strode past my house a few days later, the living picture of sobriety. She was transformed, in effect. I saw bright eyes and a true smile, and her clear voice said, "Hello," to me. "Isn't it a lovely day?"

I said, "It is," and felt wondrous.

"Isn't it?" She waved and continued on her way. And what's happened to her since? Well, she's a premier writer of gothic romances. And a recovering alcoholic. And so far as I can see, she's happy.

My first-of-many success stories, that woman.

3.

I COME UPON the stranger when I'm hunting again.

This is several days after the park and Doris Drivens. I'm downtown now — tall buildings and taller skies and plenty of people unaware of me. And there's the stranger. He is a stately man, a noticeable man, hands in his coat pockets and something about him cold and uncomfortable. He seems younger than I. His hair is glossy black, as are his heavy eyebrows . . . and there's something about his looks. Either he's angelic or satanic. There's so little difference between those states, I reflect, that I'm not sure what to call him. And he's staring at me, now smiling.

I've just stepped out of an alleyway. I was behind a building, hunting for likely targets in the dark corners; I've always allocated a percentage of bullets to people down-and-out. It's a consequence of my first success, I suppose. Unfortunately, I didn't find anyone today. No bums for the taking. All there was, was a tattered old blanket stinking of wine and laid out like someone's bed. Beside the blanket was a college-level physics text, used but not dated. A trace of my presence? A sign that one of my targets is bettering himself or herself? Perhaps, I thought. Maybe even likely. Which was why I left the alleyway smiling to myself. Which is why the stranger now takes me by surprise.

We weren't fifteen feet apart.

He smiles with his entire face, seemingly recognizing me at a glance. Then, without speaking, he give me a delicate, slow bow, bending at

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the hips and holding his palms toward me.

I freeze, unsure of how to act.

Do I run?

Do I speak to him?

Why do I feel so cold and scared all of a sudden? What does this man mean to me?

I keep silent, and he continues to smile. People shuffle past us — smartly dressed citizens who work and sometimes live inside these tall buildings — and all at once, without warning, the stranger turns and walks away from me. Where is he going? What did he want? I ask myself. Should I follow? No. No, I shouldn't. The same instincts that showed me how to handle the gift-giving bullets now scream at me. "Leave this one alone!" they say. "Stay away from him! Always, always!"

But he has abandoned me, I think.

Smiling one moment, then gone. What did he accomplish? Was it to show me that he knows me? Was that what this was about? I wonder.

To show me that he knows my whereabouts . . . and what?

A warning?

Was that the intent of that angelic/satanic smile?

4.

MOSTLY I don't know what happens to people I shoot. They're faces without names, as a rule. Only in rare cases do I have the luxury of noting the changes in their moods and abilities. And how many are there? All counted? I would guess somewhere close to nine hundred people. Almost all of them from this community and the surrounding area.

The exceptions include my neighbor lady — the one who churns out those romantic best-sellers every fifth week — and a few others up and down my street. There was one fellow, a youngish insurance salesman, who lived at the end of the block. I put a bullet in him last year, in the spring, and he slid into a profound spiritual reverie. By summer he had quit his job and entered the priesthood; and his wife, less than happy with this turn of events, divorced him and then swiftly remarried. An odd set of circumstances, I admit. Of course, I assume it was for the better, some fundamental absence now filled . . . but there's no way for me to know

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for certain. And that brings me to a critical point. A linchpin to this story:

I never know what a bullet might do.

For instance, the bulk of them appear to do nothing major. That's particularly true with children. Sometimes, yes, I do see some news item concerning a local boy who paints like an adult or a girl who's taught herself various foreign languages. But those are the exceptions. My own neighbor children have become a touch quieter — from what I can gather — and maybe more watchful. More alert. But if there's some gift that I've given them . . . well, it hides. Biding its time, growing and making ready for adulthood. I suppose. For the brain and the situation to let him or her flower.

Immediate effects show best in adults.

For instance, there's a local businessman, a prominent and respectfully feared man, who has suddenly become a prince of charity work. I stood beside him on a street corner and did my magic, and now, at least once a month, he's involved in some program for drug abusers or in can drives for the hungry. He's even gone so far as canceling his long-standing membership in the fanciest, whitest country club. It's a transformation of character, in effect.

Here are two more instances. A farmer and a housewife, both possessing modest art skills two years ago, and now living, and thriving, in New York City. At least they're thriving in the sense that they seemed happy the other night, a local news team running a feature on them. They live in similar studio apartments, and they speak with the same buoyant voices, eyes shining and smiles shining and some radiant inner light showing itself.

And now a final example. There's one man — respected and proper and thoroughly above reproach — who turned himself in to authorities a week after being shot with a magic bullet. It seems that for the past twenty years, in complete secrecy, he was having relations with certain young girls. Some storm of conscience brought on his sudden confession. And now, I'm glad to say, he's in prison — a changed man striving to make amends.

What are these bullets? Exactly?

A good, fair question. Straightforward, no-nonsense.

I'm guessing, of course, but I believe the bullets contain chemicals or minuscule devices. They enter our bloodstreams and interact with our

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brains and nervous systems, producing change. People who have been shot go through a brief period of fogginess, followed by a sudden awareness. A freshness of vision. If you will, a kind of mental rebirth. Their lives turn fluid, their potentials swelling. What is it that makes them move in one direction over another? I cannot tell. Maybe it's determined by random factors — where the bullet roots in the brain, for instance — or maybe it depends on whatever my target was thinking at the moment of impact. I don't know. If I said otherwise, I'd be lying. But then again, I find these uncertainties to be the charms of the business.

I am doing good with my work.

I've rarely had doubts.

Oh yes. There have been failures. Even tragedies. The worst of all was a certain woman who became terribly concerned about nuclear weapons and world tensions. I can remember her face now — handsome and intelligent, framed in curly brown hair. To protest global insanity, she climbed stairs to the top of our tallest bank building and doused herself with gasoline, then she struck a match. Somehow, despite agony and her melting flesh, she managed to toss herself over the edge. Her flaming body tumbled to the sidewalk below; and by the sheerest bad luck, she struck a secretary on her way to lunch, killing her as well.

That was last year. Last summer.

And the event shook me. For several weeks I did no hunting — my longest stint of inactivity to date — and it wasn't easy to start again. Not even when I could feel the urge inside me. Not even with my instincts screaming, "It's for the good of everyone, everyone!"

Which was true. Yes.

But I grew cold. And when I finally did hunt again — when I heard that soft, quick *woosh* again — I couldn't help but miss my target completely.

All these many times, and that was the first time it happened.

5.

I'M SPENDING the evening with a college girl whom I met through a somewhat informal local escort service. She's pretty, in a fashion, and I suspect she's terribly embarrassed by our circumstances. Several times she has mentioned that she doesn't normally do this kind of thing. "There aren't any strings," I have responded. "No expectations. I'm

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not going to force you to do anything against your will. Believe me." I have flashed my most charming smile, telling her, "This is a dinner date. A simple evening. We're mature people, and I'm sure we can come to terms."

Yet she remains pensive. Even when she laughs at one of my jokes, there's an ill-at-ease look to her face. A sense of doubt and disappointment in herself.

We eat at one of the best local restaurants.

After dinner, while we're leaving, the coat-room girl hands us our wraps, and I feel something unexpected inside one of my coat pockets.

I freeze for an instant, my hand squeezing a small box.

The girl says, "Thank you. For everything," because she thinks I am waiting for thanks. "I've always wondered who eats here . . . I mean, in this kind of place. . . ."

"Excuse me?" I say. "For a moment, will you?" I retreat to the men's room, to the backmost stall, and withdraw the cardboard box. Bullets, yes. Yes! A fortune of the whitish slivers, yes! How many? I wonder. Perhaps a hundred! Or more! I'm practically trembling with excitement. Never, never has there been such a shipment. And in my coat pocket, indeed! What brilliance! What subtlety! I'll be hunting hard for the next several weeks, spreading clarity and brilliance like never before!

I return to the college girl and complain of a headache. "I've had a fine time," I promise, "and you've been a marvelous companion. But I should go home now and rest. All right?"

"O.K.," she relents. "That's fine." She seems pleased and yet not pleased. I practically read her thoughts by watching her young face. Did she do something wrong? Will she get into trouble with her superiors? Maybe she should say something. Should she apologize for some gaff? Or what?

I lead her to my car, happy with the world just now.

"Thank you," the girl ventures. "I had a wonderful time." She says that with a flat, proper voice. She comes close to latching the word *sir* on the end of her thanks.

I wouldn't mind. Not tonight, not now. I drive us to the brink of campus, to the gloomy parking lot of an all-night copy shop. This is where we met earlier, as arranged. The poor girl smiles because a smile seems expected, and she can't help but feel grateful that things haven't gone any further. Then I lean toward her, no warnings, and wish for a kiss. I say,

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"Please? For an old man's sake?" and she stiffens and gives a faint little nod, a light, quick moan.

I mean no harm, of course.

My kiss is slow. I can feel the box of bullets pressing against my right hip, and with one hand I hazard a grasp of a breast, running my thumb across a considerable nipple.

The girl shudders and gasps.

A momentary lust warms me. I almost wish that the bullets had come tomorrow instead of tonight. "See?" I say. "Am I so bad as all that?" Then I withdraw my pen from my shirt pocket, the *woosh* sudden and done and the girl doing nothing for a long moment, her gaze going hollow and her breathing slow and soft. Then she gasps, and I pull away from her. She seems aware that something has happened, but she hasn't any bearings. She looks in every direction, trying to find herself.

I wonder what gift I've bestowed.

Will some musical talent, heretofore unseen, now emerge?

Perhaps I'm giving birth to a great engineer or surgeon. It might be the case, I think.

Or maybe, just maybe, it will be a simple thing like poise. Like confidence. If I see her again, in a month or ten years, or whenever, she might be holding herself with pride, feeling her ultimate worth and by every measure self-assured.

We part, the girl crossing the parking lot slowly.

I drive home and pull into my driveway, climbing the stairs to my front door. Apparently I've neglected to leave on any lights. Odd, I think. Odd. The wind is chilly, and I have to fumble with my key chain, searching for the right one. Then I hear a sound. What was that? I sense motion in the corner of my eye, wheeling now. A tallish figure is sitting on my porch swing. A voice, cool and quite precise, says, "I am prepared to shoot you. Trust me."

It's the stranger. I know his shape, and somehow his voice seems familiar, too. Or is it simply the voice I would have given his face? I can't think just now. I'm suddenly, hopelessly terrified.

He says, "Now open the front door. Slowly." He says, "Slowly, and don't try anything," and I do what he wants. "Now reach inside and turn on that porch light. Go on."

The bulb is yellow, intended to drive away bugs in warm weather.

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I blink, and focus on the cold, handsome face, yellowish in the light, and the same too-heavy coat he always wears. The coat's sleeves are too long. Inside one sleeve, cramped tight in his hand, is a revolver. I have no doubts that the man would shoot me. I can see the thick, deadly bullets in their chambers, sleeping for now, and I straighten and shake, and he says, "We're going indoors. Together."

"Who are you —?"

He is smiling. I've never seen such a smile, not ever. It seems both gloriously happy and supremely despairing . . . my legs weak, my heart weak, my dinner threatening to come up, and my dry, scared voice asking, "What do you want?"

"The box," he says. "The one in your coat pocket."

6.

WE SIT on opposite sides of the coffee table. My bullets fill a bowl meant for party peanuts — 111 of them, my companion having taken them from their box one by one. He's always watching me. He seems enthralled with me. I study the barrel of his revolver, and I notice how he seems cold even though we're indoors, even though he is still wearing that coat.

"What do you want?" I ask again. "Please just tell me."

"What I want?" he says. "What I want is to ask you a question. Try to be honest, now. I know how you'll answer if you're honest, so don't think of snowing me. Understood?"

I wait, giving a tentative nod.

"What do these things do?" His free hand holds half a dozen of the whitish slivers. "What's their function?"

"They make people smart." It's a simple question; he knows so much about me, I can't believe this is news to him —

"How do they work?" he asks. "Can you tell me?"

"I don't know the technical aspects." I pause, then say, "I wouldn't tell you if I did, either."

"They must be very sophisticated and powerful." He drops them into the bowl again, nodding. "Give me examples," he says. "Tell me about the people you've made smart."

He's the enemy. Every instinct tells me that he's my sworn enemy,

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yet I find myself answering him. I obscure identities and locations, of course; yet I have this powerful, horrible feeling that he already knows everyone and everything. There are moments when I catch his eyes on me, and it seems as if he knows me better than I know myself. Somehow.

I tell him about a certain high school girl — plain and ordinary before I put a magic bullet in her arm — and today she's an award-winning poet of regional standing. I tell him about other artists and then a certain young math whiz — and then I recall that poor woman who leaped to her death, and I quit talking for a long moment.

He says, "A convincing case. On the surface."

"On the surface—?"

"But I think you've turned the truth on its head."

"How do you mean?" I inquire.

"Suppose you aren't bestowing intelligence. But you're partially curing a condition instead. You're using these things" — and he gestures at the bowl — "to cure a profound kind of ignorance—"

"I don't understand."

He says, "There are shrouds over each of us. Shrouds across our minds. They've been set there to make us foolish and dim-witted, and what you do, in effect, is punch tiny holes in the shrouds. With these darts. A young girl and one minuscule hole, and then her natural poetic genius starts to shine through—"

"What are you saying?" I ask.

"That you're wrong about what you do."

"A shroud?" I think hard for a moment, then say, "A shroud implies that someone or something has laid it there."

"Indeed!"

I am flustered for a moment.

"For our own good," he says, "we've been given ignorance in heaping doses."

"For our own good? Ignorance is good?"

He laughs. He laughs as if nothing could be funnier or sillier, and I feel like an idiot just now. "There are forces," he claims, "large and powerful forces, that have put each of us in a shroud. Yes."

"Forces?"

"Ancient things," he tells me. "Vast and blessed with a hard-won wisdom. And a willingness to help." He pauses, his free hand scooping a dozen

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bullets from the bowl. Then he says, "I can't be too specific. Suffice to say that our minds, and every other human mind, have capacities beyond your wildest imaginings. It has to do with the numbers of interlocking neurons. It involves reaching a certain critical minimal number — a rather modest number, actually — and suddenly the brain can reason and remember with extraordinary force."

Something in what he's saying . . . it's starting to sound true.

"We reached that critical stage several million years ago," he tells me. "On the wild plains of Africa. And if it hadn't been for the ancient ones and our enforced stupidity . . . well, we would have crossed millions of years in the space of a few decades. It would have been an incredible leap for the species."

"And that would have been bad?"

"Some good might have happened. But a lot of bad. And the bad would have been awful, perhaps even fatal. I'm sure you can imagine the possibilities, the ways disaster might have resulted. I ask you. What kind of society would have formed under those circumstances? Huh? Vast intellects married to Stone Age sensibilities —?"

"Someone stunted our ancestors?"

"Just as they stunt our development, yes. We need to be fuzzy-headed." My companion tells me, "Ignorance may not seem pretty or decent, and it certainly causes us enough hardship . . . yet we're stronger in the long run. Absolutely."

"Who are these ancient ones?" I ask.

"I can't give them names," he responds. "I am not sure myself." He watches me and closes his hand around the bullets.

"So then who gives me these?" I point at the bowl.

He says, "Others," and sighs. "They're somewhat like the ancients, in some ways. Yes. But they aren't so patient. They're working to bring down the shroud in tiny increments, hoping to enhance Mankind. Not cripple him." He sighs again, then says, "It's a very dangerous game they're playing. Believe me."

But I don't mean any harm —"

"I know." He says, "I understand your position here. And I want you to realize that there's no clear evil involved. This isn't such a neat business as black versus white."

I keep silent, watching his face and then his revolver.

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He says, "Let me ask a second question," and he smiles. "Why not ever shoot yourself? Why not make yourself smarter?"

"That wouldn't be right," I tell him. Straightaway.

"But why not?"

Some inarticulate horror churns inside me. I admit, "I don't know how to put it, but I can't—"

"*They* won't let you," he informs me.

"I don't know—"

He says, "You shoot your victims once, never twice. Right? And certainly never a dozen times!"

"Of course not. . . ."

"But why not? If a little brilliance is good, why not heaping huge buckets of the stuff?"

I search for the proper words, panic seizing my throat.

"How about a hundred doses of brilliance? Or more? How would that help a person?" He produces a pen identical to mine, and with a practiced surety, he loads the pen with its full complement of five bullets. Now his smile vanishes. He says, "Relax," and aims, the wooshes coming fast. I'm startled. I'm numbed and full of sudden crazy thoughts. Five bullets! Has he really done this to me? And now he's loading again, using both hands now and watching me, aiming and firing, and me sliding for miles, slipping down some great, icy slope, the wooshes coming faster, and nothing I can do.

I'm unconscious now.

Only, I've never been more conscious in my life, in truth.

Stupidity lifts from me, dispelled, and quite a few things suddenly seem clear . . . my course laid out for me by a multitude of golden factors.

7.

THE STRANGER sits in front of the empty peanut bowl, his revolver closer to me than to him now. In these past couple hours, without pause, he's explained much of what I need to know. For eight months he has been as I see him, and no, he isn't at all well. "Toxic effects," he says. "They are getting worse all the time." He shivers and pulls his knees to his chest, and his eyes . . . those strange, dark eyes . . . are pleading with me. I can read their intent with a glance.

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Grasping the revolver, I move swiftly. No warnings, no hesitations.

The stranger straightens his back, and I shoot him between the eyes, his brain leaving through the back of his skull with a sudden rain of blood and tissue, his empty body crumbling back into the chair.

I rise, calm and still clearheaded.

I notice bits of an icy substance embedded in the shattered brain, here and there. It will be weeks before anyone discovers the body, I reason. If then. So I throw a blanket over it and secure the shades, then turn down the heat and pack a few essentials and leave town.

I drive all night, reaching a larger city at sunrise. I don't seem to be tired, so I go straight to the main library and spend the day poring through newspapers from around the country. I never take notes; my memory, I find, is flawless. My mind seems to strengthen with practice. I can now weigh thousands of factors in a moment. Three possible operatives become apparent to me, the most likely one in Florida. In the Cuban districts. There's a nest of genius down there, yes, and I teach myself Spanish in the evening, then leave. I embark on my long, long drive with my head full of great thoughts.

I have no doubt about my new work. None.

The stranger has made me see the sense of his cause, and now I'm just as focused on this business as I was on my bushwhacking.

The solitude and routine of the drive free me to think as I wish. I bring to mind that physics text I'd found in the alleyway, the one that some derelict had been reading. I remember opening it and running fast through the pages; and now the equations come to me, fluid and suddenly easy to understand. All at once they're merging and twisting and reforming into odd combinations that serve to unlock the universe for me.

I devise two ways by which I could detonate the sun. If I wished.

I make mental blueprints of a machine that will cause iron nuclei to become unstable, and with my mind's eye, I watch the earth itself turning into molten slag.

Then I carry the equations to their logical ends. I find a means by which all of space and time might be torn apart, the universe itself threatened with extinction.

I shiver.

It's a warm night, but I feel such a coldness in my veins.

I force my mind toward more prosaic matters. I think of people. I

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hope to feel more at ease, remembering people, but what comes to mind are all the times where I've held myself apart. Where I've been remote and insensitive. Like with that poor young girl whose time I purchased, and my neighbors, and others. . . .

. . . My life seems filled with souls whom I haven't touched in any meaningful fashion. . . .

I start to cry, unable to stop myself.

Then, near dawn, I pull into a lonely truck stop and call Information. "Drivens," I say. "Doris." Then I dial again and listen to the crackly, faraway sound of ringing. A sleepy voice says, "Yes?"

"Doris?"

"Yes?" she manages.

"This is a friend, Doris."

A pause. "Who is this?"

"I just wanted to tell you that your name is fine, don't worry, and there's no reason to know how a different name would have changed things. So try to just live your own life. You're a fine person, Doris. I think you're splendid."

She doesn't speak for a moment.

I imagine her sitting upright in bed, frumpy and intrigued. I am holding myself upright with my free hand, pressing hard against the glass of the booth. "Would you talk to me?" I ask. "Just for a little while, please?"

"Who is this?"

"A friend," I say. "Nobody," I say. "Let's just chat, and then I'll hang up, and that will be that. Please?"

CORRECTION

Our apologies to the author and our readers for the printer's error that deleted the introduction to "Master of the House" by Paul Cook, in our September issue.

Among other things, the introduction mentioned that Mr. Cook was writer in residence at Arizona State University. His novels include HALO, DUENDE MEADOW and ON THE RIM OF THE MANDALA (Bantam).

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Kristine Kathryn Rusch ("Phantom," June 1988) was a Nebula award nominee this year; her latest is a contemporary ghost story about a best-selling romance writer and her own remarkable relationship.

Inspiration

By Kristine Kathryn Rusch

THE STEERING WHEEL was cold. Frank held his raw red hand over the vent leading to the Oldsmobile's sporadic heating system. The clear Wisconsin night seemed fresh; subzero temperatures hardened the edges on the world, made it sharper. Even the night sky was blacker than usual.

Frank pulled his down jacket tightly around his shoulders. The gun felt solid against his hip, protection against such a cold night. He glanced at the books on the seat beside him. All of the covers depicted a man and a woman in an embrace. All of the couples seemed to be experiencing some form of ecstacy. He ran his fingers along the smooth surface of the latest book cover, along the raised edges of Catherine Rice's name. He had read, in one of the romance magazines, that they called her Cat. The name suited her. The author's photo inside the book cover could have doubled for any one of her heroines — the wide, almond eyes; the soft, seductive smile; the high cheekbones and the shiny, shoulder-length hair. He didn't know the color yet — of

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her eyes or her hair — but he would soon enough.

Christmas Eve was the prefect time, the time to catch anyone home, even the writer of best-selling romantic fiction. Unless she went to church. But judging from the sensual content of her books, Cat Rice didn't go to church. She seemed to believe in a higher power, but that higher power wasn't necessarily Christian.

Snow covered the rolling farmland. Small wood-and-wire fences ran along property lines, making a wind barrier so that drifts wouldn't pile on the roads. Every mile or two, a farmhouse loomed, usually decorated with multicolored lights around the huge picture window. Frank would tense, and then relax. Her farm was ten miles up Highway 12, where Springfield-Lodi Road converged in a strange angular corner. The farmhouse had been standing on that corner since he was a boy. He knew where she lived. He simply couldn't believe his luck in finding her.

A Christmas present to himself, meeting his favorite author. He had imagined the scene a thousand times: *Cat opened the door, tears reflecting the green of her eyes. She was suspicious at first, but his kindness, his solicitation at her obvious loneliness, led her to invite him in. They shared mulled cider and gentle kisses beneath the glow of her Christmas tree, and she let him touch her. . . .*

But sometimes his fears took over, and he knew that a famous woman like Cat wouldn't want a man like him, a man who had worked on a Janesville assembly line since he was sixteen, attaching this doohickey to that doohickey, meeting his hourly quota, listening to the roar of the machine . . . until two days ago, when the company annouced its annual holiday layoffs — and laid him off for the first time in twenty years.

No. The men she wrote about weren't always rich, but they were always bright and intelligent, educated and witty. Sometimes the scenario got away from him. Sometimes, in his imagination, she would slam the door and dial the police, and he would tear inside, rip the phone from her hands, and shove her on the couch, reaching for her clothes, the soft skin inside, taking instead of letting her give.

Sometimes he ached, and not even the gentle sensuality of Cat's books could ease him. She would understand that. She would have to.

John watched Cat lean on the dirty stonework in front of the fireplace,

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wishing that he could help. He hated the inequities in their relationship. There were so many things that he wanted to do that he simply was not capable of.

Cat stuffed wadded paper between the logs and the kindling, then grabbed a kitchen match, pausing for effect. "*Cricket on the Hearth*," she said.

John wrinkled his nose. Every year they had read Christmas stories to each other. This year he had chosen Dickens as the author. John leaned back against the art deco, restored 1920s sofa. "I prefer *The Chimes*."

Cat struck the match and watched the flame burn blue, then gold. She tucked the match against a piece of paper. The paper ignited, burned and crisped without so much as charring the kindling. "How about *A Christmas Carol*?"

He snorted. "That's everyone's favorite. I'm sick to death of it."

She lit two more matches and tossed them on the pile of wood. Papers caught, and finally kindling did, too. "That leaves *The Haunted Man*."

They stared at each other. John sighed and brushed a strand of hair from his face. "No, thanks."

Cat picked up the copy of Dickens's *Christmas Books* that lay on the rug just beyond the stonework. "Here," she said, tossing the book at John.

His hand closed around the book, only to have it fall through his fingers and thud on the glass top of the coffee table. "Wrong year."

She frowned, scooted over to the table, and opened the book to the copyright page. "Nineteen fifty-nine."

"Half of '59 is good; half isn't," he said, and winked out, leaving her to stare at the indentation in her antique couch.

"I hate it when you do that," she said. He could tell from her tone of voice that she was uncertain whether he was still in the room. Sometimes he wondered himself why he did that. Perhaps it was a way to reestablish their distance, a distance he didn't want to feel, either, but had no choice or control over.

"It's Christmas Eve. We still haven't decided which Dickens story to read in front of the fire."

He knew it was Christmas Eve, and the knowledge frightened him. He had died thirty years ago this night, and he was due for a review — which would either result in a renewal or in his final rest.

He didn't want to leave Cat. She was so small and vulnerable. And he

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was not helping her by keeping her focus on him. Yet it was that focus that had given life to her romances. Sometimes he wondered why she didn't write horror.

She pushed the Dickens aside as if it hadn't mattered. He was being foolish. She had planned a nice, romantic evening, and he was ruining it. Damn the rules anyway. He had never been through a review before. Sometimes, he was told, the Powers Above conducted a reenactment. Sometimes they snatched a shade in the middle of a project. And sometimes they didn't do anything at all. They did watch, though, and they did enforce the one rule that John really hated: he could touch anything made before his death, but anything made afterward wasn't solid to him. Cat had been born in 1961, January. Conceived in 1960, about one year too late.

On the other hand, romance novels made perfect sense. She had to relieve the sexual tension somehow.

"*The Chimes*," he said, his voice sounding hollow and echoey like it always did when he was invisible. "You'll get all the good cheer and Victorian social satire you can stand for a single evening."

"I'd rather have sex," she mumbled.

As if he wouldn't. But he didn't want her to know that he had heard. "What?" he said.

She sighed. "*The Chimes* is fine."

THE FARM loomed ahead, its yard light shining like a well-directed beacon against the night sky. In the yard he could see an unused tractor and a dilapidated barn. The house itself — an old turn-of-the-century two-story, big enough for a family full of children — had light in its curtained window. Through the main window, he thought he caught the multicolored glimmer of tree lights.

Come in, she said, tears glinting in her green eyes.

A shiver of anticipation ran down his back. He pulled the car over onto the shoulder and shut off the engine. The night was so cold, and the car was so junky-looking, anyone would assume that it had simply broken down. He got out and slammed the door. The ca-thunk! echoed in the stillness. He hadn't seen a single car this evening. Good thing, too, considering the half mile he had to walk.

He had planned it well, figuring that she would let him in to use the phone. Country folk were still hospitable to people with car trouble. With

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the distances between houses and the bitter cold, no one wanted to be responsible for someone else's death. He was counting on that kindness. The holiday would help, too.

He jammed his hands in his pockets and began to walk, his boots making little squeaking sounds on the snow.

John grabbed the knife and the wine, and proceeded to open the bottle, moving a little away from the table so that he wouldn't knock over the antique crystal goblets she had set out. Cat went to such lengths to include him, and he enjoyed it. Sharing wine with Cat made him feel almost human, almost alive again. The alcohol would slide down the back of his throat and warm him. For one short moment, he could imagine that with a simple movement of his fingers, he could touch Cat, bring her closer to him, make love to her.

A simple movement of his fingers. All it would have taken to save himself instead of Britta thirty years ago.

Even if he had survived, he would have been too old for Catherine. A seventy-year-old man and a thirty-year-old woman often married for money or companionship, not the kind of love Cat wrote about in her books.

The cork slid free with a squeal. "How about something nontraditional, like *A Tale of Two Cities*?"

Cat giggled. "God, we'd be up all night."

Like they so often were when she finished a book. She would read to him, knowing that he couldn't turn the pages of something so fresh, even if she wrote it on decades-old parchment. Those nights were as close to loving as they could get — John sprawled on the couch, feeling the heat of the fire, eyes closed as he imagined himself the hero of the novel, and Cat the heroine. She never said, but he knew that was what she saw, too. And he also knew that he was her spark, her inspiration. He had read the two novels she wrote before she came to the farm, before she found him. The prose was as good, but the characters were lifeless. The man seemed like a modern-day Heathcliff, done as poorly as a thousand other such characters; and the woman wayward, timid, and determined, rather like Cat when she had moved in. He smiled, remembering the first time he had seen her, trying to drag her antique couch up the stairs on a dolly. He had stayed invisible as he held the end of the couch, easing the weight so that the bumping wouldn't damage the furniture.

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He had worried about such things after she moved in, little helps that he made, worried that one of them would be the selfless act that would lead him away from Cat, to his final rest.

"Are you going to stand there, staring into space like you had a calling from the Angel of God, or are you going to pour the wine?"

Cat held out her glass. He grinned and poured, enjoying the clink of glass against glass — a sound he had caused. She sipped the amber liquid and smiled at him.

He poured his own drink, and then lifted the goblet. "To you," he said.

She touched her glass to his. "And to our future," she whispered. But he didn't drink. He never drank to that toast, for neither of them quite understood the meaning of it.

The walk was farther than it originally looked. Frank's nose ached, and his eyes stung with cold. The jacket he wore had thinned over the years, and he found himself shivering in the meager warmth it offered. He stared at the house ahead, the unwavering yard light, and the curtained windows. Sometimes he thought he saw a shadow moving across the room, but sometimes he thought he had imagined it.

He made himself concentrate on her books. In them the first meeting was always important, sometimes rocky, but crucial to the rest of the story. Very rarely did the hero introduce himself to the heroine, but once in a while it happened that way. Just like now. He had picked a magical night to meet a marvelous woman, and he knew that things would go well.

He had reached the bend in the road, where Springfield-Lodi curved off the highway. The house stood before him across a wide expanse of unbroken snow. The place looked foreboding somehow. He ran a hand across his stomach, feeling the nerves jump. He hadn't approached a girl in a long time — not since Sue Anne on the assembly line.

Sue Anne. He swallowed hard. He thought sure they would fire him after that. It wasn't his fault that she died. She had lied to him, led him on — and then, when he challenged her, she had denied everything, said she hadn't wanted to hurt him.

Well, he hadn't wanted to hurt her, either.

He swallowed, shrugged off the memory, and walked around to the frozen, mud-covered driveway. A cleared path led to the house. He walked cautiously, thinking of the books, thinking of her — as he had thought of

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her a hundred times on his assembly line, as he reached here, then there, then here —

The door came too soon. He hesitated for an instant, staring at the plastic, snow-dusted wreath on the weathered wood. There was something about this house. Someone had died here when Frank was very young. He shivered, thinking he hadn't been this cold in a long time, and then he knocked.

"Or I could do the entire *Christmas Carol* from memory," John said. He winked out, and his voice became eerie and hollow. "'I wear the chain I forged in life. I made it link by link and yard by yard, I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own will I wore it. Is its pattern strange to *you*?'"

He reappeared next to the Christmas tree, grinning at his own cleverness. Cat had her head cocked to one side, as if she were listening.

"I think someone knocked."

His grin grew wider. "Looks like it is *A Christmas Carol*, then. Although the clock is supposed to strike before we hear anything."

"I'm serious," she said. "Who would be here tonight?"

The words chilled him. Britta had said the same thing on the same night thirty years ago. And he had been silly then, too, teasing her that what she heard could have been a bit of undigested beef, a blot of mustard — *A Christmas Carol* again. Funny how he had forgotten that when he suggested Dickens this year. "We could see if they go away." His voice sounded hollow even though he was still visible. He didn't think he could be nervous, but he was.

The knock sounded again. Louder.

"I'm curious." She walked to the door. A wind chime, made of small glass angels, tinkled in her wake.

John followed, not afraid to show himself to anyone. Her family lived out of town; her friends were gone for the holidays — all she had was him. Whoever was at that door was a stranger.

She pulled open the door, sending him cold air that even John thought he could feel. The man behind the door was small, but powerfully built. His arms in his thin jacket were brawny. He wore no hat, and the tips of his ears as well as his nose were red.

The man's gaze flickered to John and then to Cat. "My car — I mean, I got — I mean, I'm sorry to bother you."

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"Do you need to use the phone?" Cat's voice was warm, solicitous.

The man nodded, but John could feel a lie. The man came in, and John moved beside Cat, reaching around her to close the door. The solid wood felt good to him.

"Thank you, Miss Rice," the stranger said.

THE INSTANT he said it, he knew he had made a mistake. The chill seemed to seep deeper into Frank's body. He looked at the shock on Cat's face, to the thin disapproval on the face of her man. Her man. The magazines never said anything about a husband. Or any kind of boyfriend. He should have known she would have someone here, but somehow that had never figured into his scenario. Stupid. Stupid. He was stupid to be here, just as she had been stupid to lead him on with those books, those promises of hers.

"You know who I am?" Cat asked. She had taken a step back from him and crossed her arms in front of her chest. Her hair was brown — almost mousy, and her eyes a deep blue. The details pleased him even less than the man did.

"I — I've read all of your books. I thought, for Christmas, I'd meet you."

He saw the shades click down, the public persona slip into place. "Well," she said, and the warmth in her voice was as false as the wreath on the door. "Why don't you have a seat, Mr. — ?"

"Frank," he said.

"Frank." She glanced over her shoulder, and he saw what she was looking at. The phone in the nook near the kitchen door. "You look cold. Would you like some wine?"

"No, thanks." This was slipping out of his control, first the man and now her chill. He looked over at the door. The man was gone. But he hadn't walked through the room. He had simply vanished.

Frank felt relief slide through him. The man hadn't been there at all. A projection, a trick the back of his brain was waiting to play on him.

"I have some books in the back," she said. "Let me get them and sign them for you. It was so nice—"

He grabbed her wrist. "I have the books. I was actually thinking of spending a nice evening, just talking."

"Oh." The tightness of her movements sent little ripples of anger through him. She didn't want to be near him. Like Sue Anne, she didn't

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want to be close. "You'll have to let go of me if you want me to sit down."

He did. He let her free. And he saw the red marks his fingers left against her skin. And suddenly he wanted to leave more, to show her how silly her romance was. No one had that. Not even her, alone on Christmas Eve. He slid his gun out of his pocket, grabbed her wrist again, and pulled her close, sorry that it had to be like this, but knowing that it would always have to be like this.

Just like Britta. Only this time the man was after something other than money. This time there was no split second to push her out of the way, take the bullet himself, only to lose her, too. Funny how saving her had caused him to lose her. Britta had never returned, not wanting the memories. And John had waited, all these years, until Cat.

Cat wasn't struggling. She was staring at the gun, probably waiting to see what John would do. And he could do a dozen things. Only, he didn't want to lose her, too.

John stood in the kitchen doorway, careful to be only partially visible. The stranger was waving his gun at Cat, asking her to take off her clothes. She didn't move. John took the knife from the table, hefted the blade a little. If he killed the man, another man might join them, an unwelcome ghost. But if he let the man kill Cat, then John and Cat would be together, finally, able to touch each other. . . .

Unless this was his renewal. If John were to go to his final rest, Cat might take his place as the spirit of the house. He couldn't allow her to feel this kind of loneliness, this kind of isolation.

At the last instant, John grabbed the wine bottle and hurled himself across the room, fully visible. As he had hoped, the man raised the gun away from Cat, at John, and the shots echoed yet again, bringing back Britta's cry, the moment of fading consciousness, the fear that she wouldn't survive. But Britta, like Cat now, had attacked. Cat shoved herself against the attacker, knocking his gun free and sending it skittering across the hardwood floor. John brought up the wine bottle, spilling wine all over himself as he clubbed the man's balding head. The man landed on the floor with a heavy thump.

For a moment both John and Cat stared at the stranger. He seemed less threatening now, more a frightened, misguided child.

"Thank God he was over thirty," Cat said. John smiled, ready to take

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a sigh of relief when he felt himself wavering. The fading feeling, like the one he hadn't felt in thirty years, was coming back. He wondered how. His act wasn't selfless. He hadn't sacrificed himself. Or maybe he had. Maybe he had done so earlier and had forgotten, and in his review, they decided to take him from her.

But I'm her inspiration, he thought, reaching for her, hoping that in this one last instant, a merciful God would let him touch her, just once — and his hand passed through, as it always had.

He knew that Cat didn't understand. She was hurrying for the phone, for help, for something to bind that awful man with. She didn't realize that John was fading, finding a final rest that he did not want.

His head throbbed. Frank opened his eyes. His vision doubled and blurred. Something sticky clung to his forehead, and his wrists were pulled at an odd angle against his back. So were his feet. Then he realized that he was tied up. His wrists bound to his waist and his feet. He closed his eyes again and felt tears. All he had wanted was a nice Christmas Eve.

The faint call of sirens echoed in the distance. He sighed, unwilling to struggle.

He heard a rustle and eased his eyes open. Cat had his gun aimed at him. Her hands were shaking.

Frank tried to look around, but the pain in his head made him dizzy. "Where's your boyfriend?"

"I think you killed him." Her voice was low, almost too calm. For the first time, he felt frightened. He knew the scenes in her books when someone threatens the hero. The heroine would kill anyone who threatens her man.

The sirens were growing closer. He found himself praying for their arrival. Cat's face seemed drawn and too pale.

"I didn't mean for this — I didn't mean —"

"Shut up," she said. The gun was still shaking. The sirens grew unbearably loud, and then stalled. Blue and red light circled around the living room. Frank stared at the fireplace, trying to ignore his growing dizziness.

There was a knock, and then the door opened. Voices, immediately:

"This him, ma'am?"

"Yes."

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Hands grabbed him, pulled him to his feet. He almost fell forward. Something trickled into his eyes, something red. He was bleeding to death — she would have let him bleed to death —

"We'll need you to make a statement."

"I'll make it here." Cat sounded firm, but she looked frail as the lights swirled around her. He wanted to say he was sorry. He looked for the body, but saw none. He didn't remember shooting her boyfriend. All Frank had done was fire warning shots. Maybe one had gone too far, nicked him.

"Ma'am, at least let one of our rape counselors talk with you —"

They untied the rope around his feet, connected a chain instead. The chain seemed forged especially for him. He thought he recognized all of its links.

"I'll talk here," Cat said, "or not at all."

And then they led him out the door, into the deep cold. The sky still looked clear and Christmassy, the snow spreading across the far fields like a picture on a Christmas card. But the red and blue flashing lights, the prints of a dozen feet along the walk, had ruined the Christmassy look of this house. As he had.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"What?" said the officer holding him.

"Tell her I'm sorry."

The officer grunted and made no promises. He shoved Frank into the back of the squad car. The plastic seat was cold, and the heat had scarcely penetrated the glass partition. He leaned back and closed his eyes, wishing that this had never ever happened.

The fire was dying. John reached for the wood, immediately grabbing a piece from a thirty-year-old tree, then pulled back the grate and tossed the wood inside. He felt almost hollow, not quite here. And then he remembered: the man, Cat, the gun. . . .

"Cat!" John's voice sounded echoey. He was invisible. He forced himself to wink in, the effort making him dizzy.

She was sitting on the floor, her head propped on the couch. It took him a moment to realize that she was asleep. In her hands she clutched the Dickens book. Her face was red and blotchy. She had been crying.

He crept over beside her, took the book from her hands, and touched her face. "Cat," he said.

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She stirred. Her skin felt soft beneath his fingers. He stopped, touched her blouse, her hair, her nose. "Are you dead?" he whispered.

Her eyes opened. "John," she said.

"He killed you." John couldn't stop touching her. He couldn't believe how soft she was, how silky her skin was, how warm.

"No." She was awake now, and touching him back. "I gave him to the police hours ago. I thought you were gone."

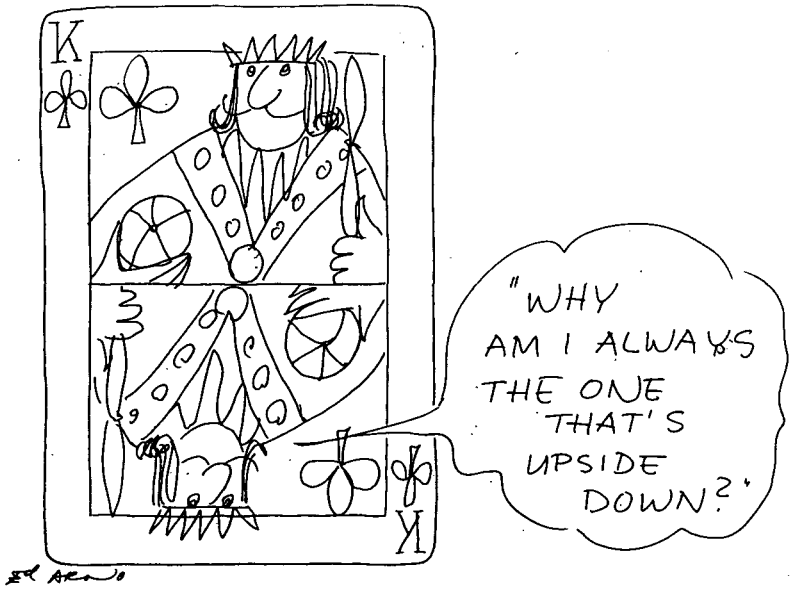
"Me, too." And then he kissed her, thinking she tasted as good as he had thought she would.

She pulled her lips back for a moment. "How come I can touch you?"

He moved away, and concentrated. He had survived his review. They had renewed him by reenacting his death. He wasn't going to fade out. He had another thirty years with Cat. And his new death date was tonight.

He leaned back into the kiss. "I'll tell you later," he said.

She sighed. She didn't seem to mind the wait.



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Avram Davidson offers a perfectly fashioned tale of retribution in this account of a man who absorbs many abuses during a difficult life, but whose time finally comes.

Mr. Rob't E. Hoskins

By Avram Davidson

DID BERTHA SCHWAMM *have* to act the way she did when Hoskins asked her for a date at the movies? After all, *who* was Bertha Schwamm? The fact that she knew real well that most people didn't think she was Hoskins's superior didn't mean that she was ready to accept herself as his equal; if people just sort of looked down at him, well, maybe she would have taken him up on it anyway. And after that, who can say?

However. It was as if the people there at Armstrong's had taken a vote and agreed that Hoskins was someone you could always poke fun at. *Should* always poke fun at. Like he deserved it. And Bertha, well, she joined in the fun. After that, of course, there was no way she could think of him as a friend, let alone as a, like, suitor. So there it is. Even then it might not have been so bad. Suppose Bertha had said, in a sincere but civil way, "Thank you, really. But my mother being always sick and all, well, I just don't go out much without her. But thanks."

Suppose she had said that? Would it have hurt? Do you think that

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Hoskins would have pushed the matter, saying, "Well, let's all three of us go out, then"? That's not likely. Likelier, he would have mumbled something civil, and gone away. And never bothered to return with another invite. But no, that's not what Bertha did. She just, oh, laughed in his face.

What was so *funny* about Hoskins? Well, O.K., he *looked* funny, popeyes and little chin. But gee, other people looked funnier. *Was* it really the breast pocket always full of pens and pencils? Because even though he carefully explained that each one was used for a different purpose, still, they all laughed and made fun of him. He explained that he wrote purchase orders with one pen and sale slips with another, and this third one was for interoffice communications, and then this one he used for personal notes and letters, and so on. . . . In a way, it *did* seem sensible; all he had to do was look at a piece of paper even upside down and a few feet away, and he knew what it was for, because of the pen strokes. Every one different. And it kept him from wearing his favorites out too fast.

But Patty Birch, she snickered and mimicked him. "Interoffice communication," she said, snickering. And then somebody else snickered. And so everyone understood: Bob Hoskins was somebody to make fun of. Bye-bye, Bob Hoskins.

And then there was what Mr. Armstrong Senior called "the intrusive *R*." Why did Hoskins have to put in the letter *R* where it wasn't supposed to be — why, that is a question. Because his spelling was usually no better than anybody's, and better than some's. Well, his sister, she said when he was a child, he used to leave the *R* out of some words; and his teacher, who'd never been married, and she had to take it all out on her students, she nagged him and nagged him. You know: *Look at me when I'm talking to you!*, and, *Do you hear me!*, and, *Well, what is* wrong *with this word!* In those days, boys didn't graduate from their diapers into long pants, and I can just see poor Bob Hoskins in his knickers, mumbling, *No R*, and the teacher saying, *Well, put it* in, *Robert*.

Of course he still had no idea of *why* it should be in, and the teacher, she was too busy pushing her control onto him to take the time and sound the word out for him. So, a long time, even, after all that was behind him, when he was, like, tired or, oh, upset and, om, confused, why, without his even giving it a thought, in would creep that letter, where it didn't belong.

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twenty dozen srafety pins

it might be. Or, it might be

two boxes dry-cell barteries

Mr. Armstrong Senior, who blustered and sometimes raised his voice, but was really very nice at heart, sighed once, and said, "The intrusive *R*, that is poor Bob Hoskins's King Charles's head." Which goes to show that Mr. Armstrong was *a very well educated man!*

But as for Hoskins himself, and Bertha Schwamm, Patty Birch, and Ellen Kelly, and the others there in the office: never mind some King Whozis's Head. That was just more proof that Hoskins was not a person you took seriously. And if Patty Birch, if that was the conclusion she came to about you? Too . . . *bad.*

Usually.

Skidgell the janitor.

Well, Skidgell *drank.* Who could blame him? Somebody came across him once doing something at his broom closet, and it had nothing to do with the brooms or the mops and buckets. Skidgell was keeping his *bottle* of *booze* there. To tell the truth, there was something else wrong with Skidgell. Something he was born with. Well, his mother — her name was Mayme White — knew Ella Steale real good, and Ella Steale was a first cousin of Francis X. Reilly, you know? The assistant commissioner? And *he* was very close in politics with Alphonsus Brody, the state chairman of — well, you get the picture. And when Mayme White went to Francis X. Reilly and said, "Francy, what am I gonna do about poor Jacky?", well, Francy Reilly said, "Leave it to me, Mayme; I'll speak to Mr. Brody." Mr. Brody must of spoken to Mr. Armstrong Senior, and Skidgell went to work as the janitor's helper at Armstrong's, and he stayed there, pushing his broom and lugging his pails and mops and lurching and staggering from whatever name they give it that he was born with. But mind you, he earned his own living. In those days they didn't give you no charity work. Any charity check. They give you a *job.* And that was *that.* And that was ten or twelve votes that Brody never had to worry about.

Anyway. Patty Birch. Oh, *that* one. So when Skidgell came lurching and staggering across the main office the day after, Patty — oh, that brazen

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one; still, you got to hand it to her, *she.* Is not *afraid.* Of *any*one. Well, she put her arm up with her hand near her mouth, and she said *hic.* She said it like this: *hic.* And everybody snickered. Like, *every*body. And Skidgell made this *ter*rible face at her, and he lifted his hand like he was going to *hit* her. And she turned her face away and sort of cleared her throat with this high-pitched sound, and she went back to her typewriting, and she never bothered *him* no more. Anymore.

Anyway. Anyway, so when Hoskins asked Bertha Schwamm to go out with him to the movies, what Bertha did was make a real funny face and turn her face to Patty and Ellen, and she made a noise like steam coming out of the radiator or something. And of course they put their hands across their mouths, and they rolled their eyes, and it was like they had all they could do to keep from busting out laughing.

Hoskins went away walking backward — oh, it was the funniest thing. Oh, what looks he give them. Gave them. After that he pretended like nothing had happened. But I bet you he brooded. And, oh, about his big adventure!

Once upon a time, it seems Hoskins, he did try to do something more than just try to work for Armstrong Wholesalers. Quite an adventure story. Hoskins's aunt, she died and left him two thousand dollars. So what did Hoskins do? He quit his job! Wrote Old Man Armstrong a letter: *Owring to new circumstances, I hereby tender my resignation effectrive immediately. Yours truly.* And it came out that he read in a newspaper that because of some war between the warlords over in China, there was likely to be a big shortage of hog bristles that they make paintbrushes out of. And he right away got on this steamship, and he went to this place called Tientsin. It's in China. And keeping just enough money for his traveling expenses, he bought hog bristles till they were coming out of his ears. And he came right back to sell them and make a bundle of boodle; in other words, a fortune. So *he* thought. Hoskins! Would you believe it!

I guess he thought that he was the only person who read that newspaper and got the same idea. Well, you bet that other people must of read that paper and got that same idea. Little did he know that by the time Robert E. Hoskins got to Tientsin, China, those others, they had bought up all the good bristles cheap. And by the time he got his junky stuff back to America, nobody was interested in what *he* had to offer. Benny Kowalsky said, "Well, I'll be pickled in dill. I often heard of people taking a slow

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boat to China, but Robert E. Hoskins is the only man I ever knew who actually done it. And by heck, it was *too* slow!"

So Hoskins came back to Armstrong's with his tail between his legs, and back he came, and he begged could he have his old job back. The Armstrong family, you can say what you like, they have kind hearts; and, ah, sure, they gave him his old job back. "Let this henceforth be forgotten from amongst us," says Old Man Armstrong in that high-fangled way of his. "Forgotten," haw haw. Every now and then again, somebody with a straight face, they would say, they would say something like this, "Say, I bet you someone could make a killing buying bristles in Tientsin for paintbrushes."

Hoskins with his pop eyes popping out, and lifting his head so he looked even more chinless than usual, Hoskins would never exactly let on what really happened to him; he just pulled this long, serious face, and he'd say, "A lotta people, they lost a lotta money in Tientsin merchandise." That's all. That's all he ever said; he didn't bellyache about it. Just, well, *he* lost a lot of money; well, it was a lot of money for *him*. Boy, they pulled his tail plenty about this — say, Patty Birch would ask him, "Why don't you take Bertha Schwamm out to dinner at the Van Horn Inn; you can afford it: you made a lot of money speculating in rice or something in China. Show her a good time; that's what a girl likes. Then she'll respect you." And Bertha would make that noise like steam, and snicker and roll around in her chair. She had a lot to roll, come right down to it.

By and by, Hoskins got wise, and he stopped explaining that all he had was his salary. He said this pretty loud once, and Old Man Armstrong, he stormed out of his office and shouted, "Don't you *like* your salary, Hoskins?" Hoskins didn't know where to crawl and hide. By and by, he got wise that they were pulling tricks on him. All sorts of tricks. Phone calls that he should meet a blonde-haired lady who, she really had admired him; meet her by the clock at the Railroad Depot at eight that night. Riding by at 10:00 P.M., people would see that he was still waiting. Maybe he'd still *be* waiting, except that Patty asked him the next day, "Meet any cute blondes lately, Bob?"

Skidgell, a little later, asked, "What's Mr. Hoskins doin' in the corner by the furnace with his face to the wall and his fists, like, clenched?"

As for all the times someone would steal one of his pens and pretend they didn't, well, who counts? You'd think they were made of gold! And, anyway, they'd put it back when he wasn't looking. Usually. All kinds of

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funny tricks they pulled on him, because he was a fellow that couldn't take a ribbing: well, too bad, if you can't be a good sport.

But, like I say, eventually he caught wise. First Patty Birch had an anonymous telephone call in the middle of the night. He must of finally caught wise. This disguised voice, well, it must of been disguised, because she didn't recognize it; he probably put a hankie over the mouthpiece like you see in the movies. Patty, she'd never say what the exact words were. "Oh, I dassn't," she'd say. "It was too immoral and threatening." And next, the next one, that was Bertha Schwamm. Her old mother, she never *did* learn to speak English real good, but she'd bundle up in fifty-seven layers of clothes and go downstairs when she'd hear it ring, ring, because she was sure that her brother in Pennsylvania was dead in the coal mines: she figured why else would anyone want to call her at one in the morning? And she'd yell and yell, "*Who! Who!*" and "*What you say!*" And Bertha would come down and push her away and ask who is it? And then she said it was, oh, just the most terrible threats and vile language. And this same anonymous voice, he also called up Ellen Kelly and did the same thing. Did I say Patty Birch, too? And this one and that one.

The telephone company and the police, they said they had *no* way of telling.

And after a while Mr. Armstrong called Hoskins into his office and stormed at him. But Hoskins denied it all. Of course, the whole thing pretty soon got on everybody's nerves. Who looked worse, the girls or Hoskins? That would be real hard to say. And . . . complaints? Accusations? Oh boy — And then all of a sudden, who came in but his old-maid sister who kept house for him, and she had this real funny, high-pitched voice that goes right through you. And she says, "I just want you all to know that I had the phone company come and take the phone out of my house, and I hope you're all very happy!"

But the calls, they kept *coming*.

The police, they asked down at Mayer's Pool Hall, and they asked at the Busy Bee and at the Depot. And everywhere the people said, No, they never saw Hoskins use the phone at night or even not at night. And that was all the public phones there was, because in them days there was no phone booth on every corner. Those days.

Now get this. What he'd been doing, he must of shinnied down out of his window so his sister couldn't hear him leave the house, and then

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probably he must of sneaked over to Fisherville and used one of the phones *there.* Can *you imagine*? I mean, that's a good five miles over to Fisherville. And then another five *back!* Know how it all came out?

The night of that big blizzard, when this whole part of the state, it was snowbound for three whole days? Well, the blizzard must have caught Hoskins on the way *back* from Fisherville; he must of got there first, because all the girls, they say, *sure,* they got one of those terrible phone calls that night. Well, I don't know if you remember the old Holzapple house? On the old Post Road? Closed for years after Old Lady Holzapple died. Well, guess he had to stop by the time he got there. Get in out of the storm. And it seems like some tramp, they don't know who, *he* was holed up there, too. And somehow they got a fire started. Well, nobody had fixed the old chimney in *years,* and while the two of them were asleep, the house caught fire. We could see it blaze from here, and they could see it blaze from Fisherville, but of course no fire engine could get there. The whole place burned down. And in the ruins—

Well, my father told me they identified Hoskins's body by the *teeth,* well, anyway, by one tooth. Old Dr. Stoltfus the dentist, he had died by then, and his records must have been thrown away. But Hoskins's sister, she remembered that he had a gold filling in a side tooth, and sure enough. . . .

Well, after that there were no more calls with those terrible threats. But then, why did Ellen Kelly disap*pear*? And who killed poor Bertha Schwamm? Patty Birch, she never came out of her house after that, and she must have put a hundred locks and chains on her door. Do you believe that the dead *walk*? No, there was never a clue; well, just this one letter from Philadelphia. Do *you* know anybody in Philadelphia? *No*body knows anybody in Philadelphia. It was, like they say, anonymous. And it was typewritten. And all it said, it said, oh yeah, real short; it said, "A lot of people were pretty cruel to Mr. Rob't E. Hoskins when he was alive, but they are very sorry now that he is dread."

What do you make of *that*?

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Here is an entertaining addition to the body of work about science fictional private eyes. Mr. O'Donnell majored in Chinese studies at Yale, spent some time in Taiwan and Hong Kong before returning to New Haven and, currently, California. This is his first F&SF story, but he has published dozens of articles and short stories and ten novels, most recently FIRE ON THE BORDER (NAL).

The Pieces of the Puzzle

By Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.

HALF A BILLION dollars on the hoof edged out of the August heat and into my office: Jerry Costellano, developer of the matter transceiver, and Cuyahoga County's most successful inventor/entrepreneur. We'd never met, but the sleeveless blue work shirt, Moondome tan, and buzzcut silver hair made him familiar to anyone who read the papers or watched TV news. I held out my hand. "It's a pleasure, Mr. Costellano."

For an instant, pure delight illuminated his face, replacing the worry there. No shrinking violet, he — Jerry Costellano *liked* it when a stranger knew his name. Switching the flight bag he carried to his left shoulder, he took my hand. "Mr. Nakata." He had a firm grip, but a quick one. Releasing my fingers, he plopped into the chair I had planned to offer him. "I need a private detective, and I want to hire you. Are you available?"

"That depends." I took my place behind my desk, my back to the window overlooking East Ninth Street. "Is the problem personal, or corporate?"

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"Why does that matter?" Two vertical creases reappeared between his eyebrows. He touched the phone in his shirt pocket as if for reassurance.

"Because Mick Dupinsky is your chief of security. I was on the force with him, and I know how good he is. Why isn't he handling this?"

Costellano clasped his hands behind his neck and stared over my head at the far wall. "Mick is very, very good, but confidentiality is crucial. If word of my — problem got out, JCE Corp. would be in serious trouble."

"Mick is hardly a blabbermouth."

"Of course not!" He seemed surprised at my interpretation. "It's that he's too busy to do it himself — he'd have to assign his people to it. Who can vouch for them? But second, Mick's been with JCE Corp. since I founded it, and he's acquired twenty, thirty thousand shares of stock through the incentive plan. Call it half a million at yesterday's closing price. Or zilch, if word of my — problem seeped out."

"I'm not sure what you're saying there."

"I'm saying—" He sighed, and started over. "I'm saying Mick would have half a million reasons to sweep the whole thing under the carpet and forget about it."

"Isn't that what you want?"

"No. I want it investigated. I want answers."

Costellano sounded plausible. He had convinced himself, at least. I nodded. "Let's get to the problem, then."

"You know what JCE does?"

"Sure. You make the frammistans that charge the doohickeys that power the widgets that transmit matter from one point to another." I grinned at him. "My background's in modern literature, not particle physics."

He grinned back. "That's fine; we don't need waveform mechanics to handle this — I hope." The smile faded away; tension reasserted itself. "A little background, first. I've invented a —" He shot me an amused glance. "A doohickey, if you will, that will permit the system to transmit four hundred kilograms of mass at a time — twice its current capacity of two hundred kilograms per transmission."

"Does this mean you've just rendered every matter-transceiver booth in the solar system obsolete?" I hoped not. My window faced the MT station at East Ninth and Euclid, and I enjoyed watching the steady streams of people going in and out.

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"No, the two models will be compatible — the new ones will be able to send to and receive from the old ones — but from new to new, you'll be able to send four people at once instead of two."

"How nice for JCE Corp."

"Not quite. We need a billion five to build the plant to produce the booths incorporating the — the doohickey. We're already overleveraged — our debt-equity ratio's up to nineteen to one — and we'll be violating loan covenants right and left if we borrow that billion five."

"So you need more equity. Even a private detective with a background in modern lit can figure that out. What's the problem?"

"This." He licked his lips, and set the flight bag on my desk. "Inside is — I think it's a human thigh. It must have been severed with a dull paring knife because the cuts are so . . . ragged. I didn't notice any distinguishing marks — no scars, tattoos, birthmarks, etc. I found it in my swimming pool. It was frozen." Behind his tan he looked pretty gray.

I looked at the bag, but made no move to open it. Part squeamishness, part distraction: it reminded me of something, and I couldn't imagine what. Gogol's "The Nose" maybe. "Did you call the police?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Do you know what would happen if I did?"

"Uh-huh. Half the force would mat out to your estate to see if the rumors about your, um, secretaries are true."

"That, too," he said.

"So what do you want me to do?"

"Mr. Nakata, I am not a modest man, but I am not exaggerating when I state that I am currently indispensable to the financial well-being of JCE Corp., and will remain so for at least six months."

"I'll accept that."

"Wall Street knows this, too. We need a billion five. Our board has authorized the issuance of 75 million new shares of stock; we intend to offer them at twenty-two. The thing is, if the Street has any reason to believe that I might be, shall we say distracted? — or worse yet, detained? — then they won't bid *five* for those shares. Maybe two. Three, tops. That would leave us far short of our capital requirements. We would be unable to manufacture the new 'doohickey,' and would continue to lose market share on the old 'doohickey' to the East Asians. Word of this" — he

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touched the handle of the gym bag — "must not get out, at least not until we've completed the stock offering."

"When's it scheduled for?"

"Next month."

I winced. "'Tomorrow' was the answer I was hoping to hear."

"And it's the answer I wish I could give you, but —" He shrugged.

"Right." Frowning, I nibbled on my thumb. What was it this package reminded me of? "At the risk of losing an undoubtedly fat fee, I have to ask a few more questions."

"I didn't expect anything else."

"Good. I hope you also expected a — call it a lie detector?"

"Yes."

"Fine." I activated the various stress-analysis devices, checked the readouts, asked a few questions to set the levels correctly, then: "Mr. Costellano, do you know how this thigh got onto your property?"

"No."

The gauges read nominal all the way. "Do you know who it . . . belonged to?"

"No."

"Do you suspect any person or persons of having done this?"

"No."

"Not even corporate enemies wishing to embarrass you?"

"Not even that."

The machines claimed the man was telling the truth as he knew it. Damn. It would have been much easier if he had lied. . . . "I'll tell you, Mr. Costellano, I don't feel real comfortable concealing evidence."

"Evidence of what?"

"The word 'murder' springs to mind, sir."

"I understand why you feel that way, Mr. Nakata, but how do you know that murder has been committed?"

"Well —" I gestured to the bag. A wisp of memory appeared suddenly — but evaded my grasp, and slipped back into the fog.

"Mr. Nakata, I realize the essential absurdity of my position, but, as I understand it, one cannot assume murder without a body, and where's the body?"

"Have your neighbors checked their pools lately, sir?"

"Touché." He settled back in his chair. "How about this? Keep that bag —"

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"Ah—"

"Please? If other . . . *parts* turn up in my neighborhood, then by all means contact the police. Or if it seems to" — he groped in the air for the word that would say what he wanted without actually saying it — "oh hell, if it seems like it used to be attached to someone who's now missing, then call the cops. But if there's no murder, and no missing person, could you please investigate this with the utmost of discretion?"

"I'll need to bring in a consultant."

His dark eyes opened wide. "Why?"

"A physical anthropologist; a tenured professor at Case Western, and capable, I think, of telling me things like . . . male or female, height, weight, hair color, age . . . the kinds of things you need to know if you're going to connect, ah, *this* to a missing-person report."

"Will you keep my name out of it?"

"She'll never hear it from me, Mr. Costellano."

He nodded. "Do I need to say, 'Spare no expense'?"

"Not really, but I'm glad you did."

"Fine." He stood then. "Thank you, Mr. Nakata. I'll be in Singapore for the next few hours, but I should be back at the estate by noon. I'll hope to hear from you soon."

I stood, too. We walked to the door, where we shook hands. He flicked a bead of sweat off his brow, and left.

COSTELLANO HAD wrapped the thawing thigh in plastic, but I wore gloves anyway when I pulled it out of the bag and set in on Linda Arprasad's desk. "What can you tell me about this?"

She blinked, lifted a corner of the plastic, and slipped a fingertip through to prod the chilled flesh. "Why do you want to know?"

"A case I'm working on."

"For whom?"

"C'mon, Linda, you know I can't tell you that."

"Then we proceed to the next question in order of importance: Are you paying my consultation fees in coin of the realm, or more yard work?"

"Cash. Check, actually. And I told the client I'd be calling you in, so there won't be a hassle over your rates. By the way, what does a physical anthropologist charge these days?"

She flashed her sunniest smile. "In this case I'll keep it to seventy

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an hour, plus a usage fee for any university equipment I need."

"Seventy? That's—" I swallowed hard. Costellano was not going to quibble over that. The consultants *he* hired started at five hundred an hour. "That's fine, Linda." I kept my face impassive while I enjoyed the shock on hers. She was clearly kicking herself for not having demanded more. "You will have something for me soon, though, won't you?"

"What do you want?"

"Anything you can tell me."

"All right." She began to unwrap the damn thing. "I'll call you this evening with the easy stuff — sex, race, age and height and weight ranges, blood type, like that. The hard stuff will take longer. Of course, if we're *really* lucky, he'll have his DNA on file somewhere, so that when I run it through the sequencer, we'll come up with his name and address."

"'He'? 'His'?"

"First impression. If I'm wrong, though, I'll bet you anything that her nickname was Thunderthighs." She shook her head. "Before you go, there is one thing you have to tell me — does this have anything to do with that White House thing last month?"

I snapped my fingers. *That* was what I'd been trying to remember. "Linda, you're wonderful!" I would have kissed her, but she did not take kindly to that sort of thing. "I've been trying to remember that for an hour now. The papers said it was a foot, right?"

"Yeah." She eyed me strangely. "A bare foot. Black, immature, and cold as hell. They found it on the White House lawn. It was cut just this roughly." She paused for a long count of five. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Is there a connection?"

"No." Then I shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. I'm just starting out. I don't know what this is connected to."

"I can tell you what it's *not* connected to."

"What's that?"

"The hipbone or the kneebone." She gave me a ghastly smile. "Now go away; I have work to do."

I went.

Waiting in line at the University Circle MT Station, I had an interesting thought: What if the two instances were linked? Did a madman

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with a small knife and an ice chest wander the cities of American, leaving a hand here, a head there, a thigh in a pool, a foot on a lawn? Granted, two cases did not a serial killer make, but what if there were more?

A big black guy with beer on his breath touched my shoulder. "Split a mat?"

"If you're headed for East Ninth and Euclid."

"Close enough." He gave me a five-dollar bill. "You Korean?"

"Nah, I'm from California."

"No shit? What the hell'd you come here for?"

"You mean to Cleveland?" Our turn had come, and the booth asked to be paid. I matched the black guy's bill with a five of my own and fed them into the slot. "'Cause I like ice and snow."

He looked at me funny and took the far corner of the booth. I tapped the map button for our destination since it was quicker than punching in the full code number. The door closed.

The door opened. He waited till I was well away before he came out.

When I reached my desk, I gave the madman hypothesis a whirl. I drew up lists of three words: the first containing synonyms for "found"; the second, synonyms for "severed"; the third, names of discrete parts of the human body. Then I gave the computer the three lists, and told it to search the wire-service database for articles published in the past three years that contained one word from each list in any sentence in the article.

Hard copy began to whisper out of the laser printer almost immediately. The White House foot in July, of course, which stumped the Secret Service. A Boy Scout found three fingers in Atlanta ten weeks ago; police assumed somebody had slammed a hood down on a would-be car thief. A blonde ponytail fell on a police cruiser in Aptos, California, in early June; authorities professed puzzlement. A cat dragged a black ear into a South Boston apartment house in May; they attributed that to gang warfare. Miami police thought the icy, limbless torso they found in March resulted from a drug dealers' dispute. Male genitalia turned up in San Francisco in February, and no one was quite sure what to make of them, though a disc jockey lost his job when he provided new words to an old Tony Bennett song.

The printer spewed paper faster than I could read it. If a psychopath with a dull pocketknife had done all that, he (or she) had been very busy indeed.

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I started skimming the articles, and one fact became apparent quickly: no article mentioned either the identity of the victim, or the arrest of the presumed fruitcake.

I massaged my temples and tried to decide whether the search pattern the computer was using would turn up an article announcing such an arrest. Possibly not. "Found," "cut," and /body part/ would quite naturally appear together in the news item announcing the thing's discovery. However, the second one would go more like, "Police yesterday arrested an individual accused of amputating his mother-in-law's thumb."

I stared at the computer. I could program it with new parameters — but then said to hell with it, and reached for the phone. I started with the police forces on eastern daylight time, and planned to work my way across the country with the sun.

Boston first. The article had quoted a Sergeant Charles McTouhy, so I asked for him. They put me on hold, and he took me off it thirty seconds later. "McTouhy here."

"Sergeant, this is Len Nakata of Cleveland. I'm calling in reference to that human ear that a cat dragged into a tenement a couple of months back."

"Did you say Cleveland P.D.?"

"No, just Cleveland. I'm private. I was wondering if you've made any arrests in the case."

"Private. Hmm. What is it that provokes your interest, Mr. Nakata?"

"I came across it in the course of some research, and I got curious. Have you arrested anybody?"

"Not a soul."

"Did the um, the ear's owner ever come forward? Have you located him yet?"

"No." He let out a coarse guffaw. "We decided he never heard we wanted to talk to him."

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. That helped a little. "Any theories as to what happened?"

"Are you familiar with Boston?"

"I've visited a few times."

"Well, then, perhaps you already know this, but there's a good deal of racial hatred between the poor blacks of Roxbury and the poor Irish of Southie. What we assumed when we found the ear and saw what color

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it was, we assumed that either one of the brothers came from Roxbury on a mission of vengeance — because what else would be bringing him into a Southie alley late at night? — or some ignorant out-of-towner punched the worst possible map button on the MT for someone of his persuasion. We never found even a hair off the man's head, though, nor a scrap of shirt from his back, so we never got any further in our assumptions than that. And I can't tell you more, because I don't know any more."

"Well, thank you, Sergeant. I appreciate all your help—"

"You can show your appreciation, Mr. Nakata, by giving me another call if you come across anything that might help us."

"That would be my pleasure, Sergeant." I hung up. No help there.

Or anywhere else I called in the course of that afternoon, it turned out. According to the computer, during the past three years, pieces of human beings had turned up thirty-four separate times in nineteen major cities, but not one police force I called would admit to identifying either the victim or the assailant.

A Dallas cop told me something interesting: "Well now, it ain't so much a matter of *what* you find, necessarily, as it is a matter of where you find it. You take these toes I was investigating — found 'em in a parking lot. Medical examiner, he said they most likely came offa young Hispanic woman, 'bout middle height and probably not more'n a pound overweight, if that. Well now, that puts a cute li'l Meskin girl in a parking lot real late at night, which kinda give us a picture of what she was doing there. Since she never come in to file a complaint, what we figured was the somebody who might feel he had a right to object to her late-night activities — a husband or a boyfriend, say — came along while her foot was sticking out the back window of somebody else's car, and he just up and lopped those toes right off, and left 'em there for the rats to nibble on."

"Uh-huh. . . . What if you'd found them somewhere else?"

"Well now, that would purely depend on where they showed up. In a school? Why, we'd be real upset. In a locker at the bus station or airport? We'd probably assign just a whole bunch of folks to investigate. You see what I'm saying? It ain't *what*, it's *where*."

"I do see what you mean. Thank you very much for all your help."

When I got off the line, I mulled over what he had said. He was, after all, as much a professional as I was, so maybe there was something to it.

I spent the next hour or so issuing new instructions to the computer.

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Its assignment: the where of it all. I told it to obtain a map of each incident's location, accurate as of the date of the incident; to itemize *everything* within five hundred meters of the discovery, naming it, describing it, and giving the distance; and finally, to examine all thirty-four incidents and see if any category of thing had been located close to each. Like a major intersection — or a parking lot. An abandoned building. A medical school or a mortuary or —

Then I shut off the lights and matted home.

IN THE morning a rude surprise awaited me. According to the computer, each of the body parts had been found within seventy-five meters of a matter-transceiver antenna.

Granted that matter-transceiver antennas dotted the cityscape of America, this seemed too coincidental. Fire hydrants were more common, but even they appeared a greater mean distance from the incidents.

I called Costellano immediately. "I think I have some bad news for you," I said once he got on the line.

"Not over the phone. Can you come out?"

"You're the client."

"Thanks. I have a private matter-transceiver station —"

"I'll drive."

"As you like. How long will it take you?"

"Maybe an hour. Depends on the traffic."

It took forty-five minutes. I wished it had taken longer. I did not look forward to telling my client that he was about to lose his fortune.

The maid directed me down a hallway that could have served as a drag strip, out the back door, and round a topiary garden to the pool where Costellano was sunning himself. His bathing suit was so small there wasn't much of himself he wasn't sunning. "Mr. Nakata." He got up from the chaise longue and held out his hand. "So what's the bad news?"

"Let's have your computer call mine."

We went into his study, and he made the arrangements. Then he swiveled around his leather-upholstered desk chair and narrowed his eyes. "I'm waiting."

"The thigh in your swimming pool was the thirty-fourth human body part to turn up all by itself in the past three years." I gestured to the data materializing on his computer's screen. "The people the parts came from

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have never been identified. Either they never complained, or they vanished, and no one filed a missing-person report."

"I can buy that," he said. "So what's the problem?"

"The problem, Mr. Costellano, is that every single part turned up within seventy-five meters of a matter-transceiver antenna."

"So?"

"It seems pretty obvious to me — the MT system is screwing up. It's slicing and dicing its passengers, and spraying body parts all around. What I can't get is why no one's reported any of them missing."

His eyes widened and his nostrils flared. His big right hand curled into a fist — unconsciously, I hoped. "Do you know what you're saying?"

"Yes, sir. I'm saying the matter-transducer system has killed thirty-four passengers in the past three years."

"That's totally ridiculous, Nakata. Matter transmission is the most thoroughly tested transportation technology ever—"

"With all due respect, Mr. Costellano, that's not going to help you a whole lot when the liability suits start piling up around your ears."

"Crap!"

This would not be easy. Or pleasant, either. "Look. You have a problem. Whether you admit it or deny it doesn't change reality — matter transmission is killing people."

"You sonofabitch!" He bounced to his feet. "You listen to me now, Mr. Modern Lit. We don't just throw a passenger out onto the airwaves and hope he gets reconstituted. When we tear somebody down, the transmitter sends a copy of — you'd never understand what it really is, so call it a hologram even though it's not; or better, a three-dimensional representation of the energy gradients in the booth. Call it a holo, though, O.K.? It sends a copy of that holo of the contents of the booth to the receiver, and the receiver sends that copy back just to make sure nothing got changed in transit. They do that *three times!* And the transmitter holds the holo in memory until the receiver says reconstitution is nearly complete. At that point the transmitter sends a *fourth* copy of the holo, the receiver compares the physical object with the three-dimensional mathematical description, and then and only then does it finish the reconstitution. There's no fucking way somebody's going to disappear, you hear me?"

"Yeah? You got a thigh in your swimming pool, and we can't find the guy it used to belong to. You're telling me somebody loses a thigh on a

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mat, and he doesn't speak up? Chrissakes, he must have been coming in to your station right here — you telling me you didn't notice a thighless corpse in the booth? What'd you do with him, huh?"

"You're insane!" He grabbed my shirtfront with his big left hand and pulled me so close that my nose bumped his collarbone. "We have regulators and auditors coming out our ears! You think *they'd* overlook a few missing passengers?"

"I'll tell you what I think. I—" My pocket phone rang.

The noise seemed to awaken Costellano to what he was doing. At any rate, he growled deep in his throat, then let go and pushed me away with one move. "Answer it." He stalked to the window.

Saved by the bell. I took the phone out and flipped it open.

"Len? Linda. Hey, we got lucky!"

"Lucky? How do you mean?"

"He *did* have his chromosomes on file! I got his name and address."

I glared at Costellano's back. I didn't feel bad about bringing down his world anymore. Anybody that narrow-minded deserved it. "Yeah?"

"Lenny, the guy who used to own this thigh?"

"Come on, Linda, the name!"

"Jerry Costellano."

"Jer—" I choked. Holding the phone at arm's length, I stared at it for a minute and a half. When the faint squawking coming through the speaker grew loud enough to irritate, I brought it back. "Linda? You made a mistake somehow."

Her voice chilled perceptibly. "No mistake. I put four samples through four sequencers, just to avoid mistakes. It's Costellano, all right. Shit." Now worry mingled with frost. "What do you figure, Lenny? The mob? I mean, should I be afraid for my own safety, now that I know this? What's going on here?"

"Linda," I said wearily, "I honest to God wish I knew. I'll tell you one thing, though. It ain't his."

"It is!"

"I am standing in his study at this very moment. He is perhaps five meters away. He is wearing a bathing suit that leaves nothing to the imagination. He has both thighs, Linda. I can see 'em."

Costellano must have overheard. He moved back toward me, his face a study in astonishment. He tapped his chest and mouthed the word "Mine?"

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"Yeah. Unless you're an imposter — or Jerry Costellano's ghost."

As Linda said, "What?", I began to understand why Costellano would be a billionaire before he hit fifty, and why I would never be much more than a medium-priced private detective till the day I died.

"Ghost." His eyes *looked* at nothing, yet *saw* not only the solution, but the whole train of interlinked equations that proved it. "Oh. My God." His pupils widened, contracted, and widened again. Then he blinked. And kissed me on the forehead. "Thank you!"

"Talk to you later, Linda." I pocketed the phone, and dabbed at my hairline with a handkerchief. "What the hell was *that* all about?"

"You want the math?"

"No."

"It's that triple transmission." He grabbed a pencil and wildly sketched wavefronts on the wallpaper. "It's going back and forth just as fast as possible, and — you know what ghosts on TV are?"

"Ah . . . when the broadcast signal bounces off something, so the antenna gets two signals instead of one, and they're sort of, um —" My hands moved vaguely, trying to make a gesture that would describe the situation. "They're like, out-of-phase? Is that the word?"

"That's what we have here — the incoming reflection interferes with the outgoing check signal. When conditions are just absolutely right, you get partial reconstitution at the point of interference." He clapped his hands. "That's why the damn thing was frozen! That's where the energy came from!"

"Can you fix it?"

He laughed. "Child's play. An extra microsecond of lag time between reception and retransmission. That's all it'll take. Let the 'ghosts' go past, that's all. But." He raised his arms in triumph. "But oh jeez!"

"Oh jeez *what?*"

"It never occurred to me before, but there has got to be a major opportunity here." He half-walked, half-staggered to his desk.

I followed. "An opportunity for what?"

"Spare parts! Accident victims, birth defects, kidney failures — I'll bet you can just *copy* the part you need! The technology'd be almost the same as what the MT system uses. Tweak it a little for better control; add a flip feature so you can use right for left and vice versa. . . . And a receiverless transmission system, too: just focus two transmitters, and tune the inter-

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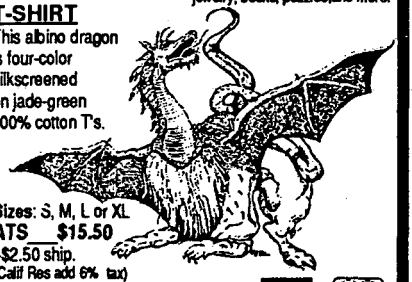

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ference patterns so you could drop anything anywhere at damn near the speed of light — Nakata, you're a goddamn genius!"

"Me?" I gaped. "Me?"

"You, Nakata. We'll set it up as a subsidiary. Five percent sound about right for your share? The lawyers'll be in touch; there'll be papers to sign. Now go. I have work to do."

What could I say? I went. Costellano would definitely be a billionaire before he hit fifty. And I'd have 5 percent. . . .

Nonetheless, I drove home.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE INVENTION OF THE DEVIL

I HATE BEING photographed. No, let me make that more specific — I hate posing for photographs. I don't mind being snapped while I'm doing something else. I simply don't notice it. But to stand around with a glassy smile, holding my hands this way and that for a hundred different poses, strikes me as unnatural and as an abominable waste of time.

I was once participating in the publicity for a video game version of my robot novels in a gloomy warehouse with lots of raucous music, and with photographs being taken endlessly. I had to pose with different people in different ways and different smiles, feeling my temper frazzle more and more.

I was worn nearly to death by the time the photographers stopped, but then a tall, dignified-looking man arrived, and all the photographers burst into a renewed frenzy of activity. I was dragged over and made to stand beside the man, and the picture taking resumed.

He seemed indifferent to the matter, but I wasn't. In an extreme of controlled fury, I turned to my companion, and said, "I think that photography is the invention of the devil, don't you?"

And he smiled and said, "I hope not. I'm the president of Eastman Kodak."

That was a conversation-stopper indeed, and just to make sure you understand why, I think I will write an essay that will sneak up on Eastman, and on Kodak as well.

From the very earliest period of the existence of *Homo sapiens* our species has had the urge to indulge in representational art. That is, people have labored to draw lines and apply colors, or to carve ivory or wood, into shapes that resemble real, familiar things. The idea is to have someone who has not made the artwork, or even seen it being made, look at it and say the equi-

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valent of, "Hey, that looks like a man hunting bison with a bow and arrow."

Why this impulse? Perhaps it was an attempt to adjust fortune. By showing an animal being shot by an arrow, you were explaining to the gods that what you wanted was to make a kill the next day, so that you might eat rather than starve. Or perhaps it was just the esthetic sense, the desire to do something that looks good and that other people will see and admire and praise you for.

The knowledge of such primitive art first came about 1860, when a French paleontologist, Edouard Armand Lartet (1801-1871), unearthed a mammoth tooth with an excellent drawing of a mammoth scratched into it. The drawing was accurate enough to make it certain that the artist had seen a mammoth in life, so that it was old enough to date from the time before mammoths had become extinct. What's more, it had to be made by a human being, for we know of no other species than our own that ever engaged, or could engage, in representational art.

(To be sure, chimpanzees have produced finger paintings which art experts have thought to have merit, but such paintings are "abstract art." One can conclude that a chimpanzee brain is sufficient for abstract art, but that a human brain is required for representational art. I'm not trying to make an artistic judgement here, I'm just stating what seem to be the facts.)

An even more startling discovery was made in 1879, when a Spanish archeologist, Marcellino de Sautuola (d.1888), was excavating Altamira Cave in northern Spain. His twelve-year-old daughter, who was with him, spied paintings on the ceiling and called out "Bulls! Bulls!" There were paintings of bison, deer, and other animals in red and black, and they were perhaps drawn as long ago as 20,000 B.C. So well were they done, that many people refused to believe they were truly ancient, but thought them to be a modern hoax. It was only with the finding of other caves and paintings, that the art was finally accepted as ancient.

Ancient figurines have also been discovered, often of the female form in distorted ways, showing enormous breasts and buttocks. These may have been fertility symbols, too, though I had a professor once who thought that the sculptors simply emphasized the parts that interested them most.

I can't very well proceed now to give a detailed history of the further development of art. I don't know enough about it, for one thing. However, sculpture reached a degree

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of perfection with the Greeks of the Classic age, as we all know.

Painting was a little trickier. We don't have many examples of ancient painting, but we know that there was never any really successful representation of a three-dimensional illusion on the two-dimensional surface of a painting till Renaissance times. (This is not to say that a three-dimensional illusion is essential to a great painting; only that it makes the "representation" of the scene seem more real, for what that's worth.)

What was required for the presence of a three-dimensional illusion was an understanding of the laws of perspective, and this meant the application of geometry to art. The first to do this in a methodical way was the Italian artist Leone Battista Alberti (1404-1472) who, in 1434, published a book on the laws of perspective. That gave us the masterpieces of such other Renaissance artists as Raphael (1483-1520) and Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), and of later artists such as the Frenchman Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825).

I always love to look at David's paintings because they manage to look so accurately drawn as to resemble a photograph, and to my untutored eye, photographic reality is the essence of pleasant art.

However, it was precisely that look that put an end to the popularity of representational art. Once photography came into being, what was the point in preparing art that looked like photographs? For that reason, artists turned to surrealism, impressionism, abstractionism, and other forms of art that moved beyond bland reality into the realm of impressions, emotions, moods, or the mere esthetic appreciation of lines and colors cleverly arranged.

But how did it come about, then, that photography was invented?

Photography can be traced back to its most primitive beginnings, if we consider eclipses of the sun. Any astronomer who wanted to study an eclipse had difficulty doing so without blinding himself. People must have noticed, however, that Sunlight passing through small apertures, such as the spaces between tree leaves, produced small circles of light on the ground that looked like images of the Sun.

Suppose, then, that you made a small hole in the wall of a dark room. Wouldn't an image of the Sun be cast on the opposite wall, or on the floor? To be sure, light enters the hole in slightly different directions so that the image is fuzzy. The smaller the hole, however, the less room for different directions, and the sharper the image.

The Arabian physicist Alhazen

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(965-1039) was the first to describe this phenomenon and recommended it for observing solar eclipses, since the image of the Sun faithfully reflected the encroaching Moon and was sufficiently dim to be observed without optical damage. The Italians called this trick of using a dark room with a pinhole for the entry of Sunlight, a "camera obscura," which is Italian for "dark room." We still keep the word "camera" for any closed box, large or small, within which an image is formed.

For five hundred years, pinhole cameras were used only to study the Sun. Nothing else was bright enough to send enough light through a pinhole to make useful observations possible.

In 1550, however, it occurred to an Italian mathematician, Girolamo Cardano (1501-1576), to use a wider hole with a biconvex lens fitted into it. The wider hole admitted much more light, and the lens brought it to a focus. For the first time, easy-to-view images could be produced of, let us say, street scenes. The trouble was that the image was produced upside down. (This wouldn't matter in the case of the Sun.) Worse yet, whereas a pinhole camera could form an image that was well-focussed at any distance, a lens camera would focus the image only at a certain point so that the surface on which the image was formed had to be thus far from the lens and no farther or closer.

In 1568, the Italian scientist Daniele Barbaro (1528-1569) introduced a diaphragm that could cut down or increase the quantity of light entering a lens, and, in 1573, another Italian scientist, Ignatio Danti (1536-1586), introduced a concave mirror in such a way that the image was re-inverted and shown right-size up.

By 1558, the Italian physicist Giambattista della Porta (1535-1615) was suggesting that the images produced by pinhole cameras could be used by artists who could trace the outlines of the image and, in this way, learn the subtle uses of perspective.

Of course, using a large room for the purpose had its disadvantages, compared to some portable object within which the image could be formed. It was not till 1657, however, that a really successful portable camera was devised by the German scientist Caspar Schott (1608-1657) It consisted of a small box inside a larger one. The smaller could be moved back and forth to improve the focus. Other improvements were made, and, by 1685, the camera in its basics was just about the one we use today.

All that was now needed was a *permanent* image, but how could

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that be produced? Surely, it must have seemed an impossible achievement in 1685, and people might well have supposed that the camera would never be used for anything but to amuse people with little duplications of what was going on outside, and to help artists practice their perspective.

People had noticed, though, that silver compounds, which were white, tended to darken in Sunlight. The cause was not known. It might be the Sun's heat or something in the air.

In 1727, however, a German scientist, Johann Heinrich Schulze (1687-1744), was the first to show that it was light that was responsible.

He made use of this phenomenon to carry out the following demonstration. He began with a beaker containing a solution of silver nitrate and added enough chalk to make it a semi-solid slurry. He then covered it with paper in which he had cut out holes in the shape of letters. He placed the beaker in the Sunlight. Where the light passed through the holes, it darkened the material beneath, while the parts covered by the paper remained white. In this way, he "wrote with light" and, in Greek, that is "photography." It was just a cute trick, however, and was put to no practical use.

We know what happens. Silver is a rather inert metal and does not very readily form compounds. When it does form a compound, that compound is comparatively easy to break up. Sunlight possesses enough energy for the purpose and liberates a silver atom from molecules of the compound. The silver atoms coagulate into tiny fragments that are black, and so the white compound darkens.

After that, for over a hundred fifty years, chemists studied the darkening effect of light on silver compounds and occasionally tried to form images as Schulze had done. The trouble was that these images could not be made permanent. A portion of the silver compounds might be darkened while others remained white, so that nice images could be formed, but as the silver compounds remained in the light, even in diffuse daylight, it all gradually darkened and the image was lost.

That brings us to a French inventor, Joseph Nicephore Niepce (1765-1833). He was interested in lithography, a form of art that involved the placing of greased designs on stone. He had no artistic talent of his own, and his son made the designs. When the son was called up for military service (Napoleon was fighting his last battles), Niepce tried

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to work out a way of producing designs automatically.

Images on silver compounds didn't work for him any more than for anyone else, so he tried to use a thick asphalt-like hydrocarbon. This didn't darken in Sunlight but it did harden. He dissolved the asphalt in lighter hydrocarbons and smeared a thin layer on a metal surface. He would then allow the light to pass into a camera onto the metal. Wherever light fell, the asphalt would grow hard; elsewhere it would stay soft. After that process was done, he could use solvent to remove the soft asphalt while the hardened asphalt remained behind. In this way, he obtained a more or less permanent duplicate of the original scene. It might be called an extremely primitive photograph.

He produced the first such photograph in 1827 and tried to interest investors in the process, but the exposure time was eight hours, and that made it nothing more than a tedious curiosity. Niepce was further hampered by a wastrel brother, and he was forced into bankruptcy.

Meanwhile, another Frenchman was working on the problem of preparing a permanent image. He was Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre (1789-1851). He was connected with the theater, for he was an artist who specialized in painting scenic backdrops. To make the backdrops more entertaining, he invented the diorama, consisting of optical effects in which real objects were made to blend in with a painted background and in which different scenes might be displayed successively — to give an effect, for instance, of changing seasons.

Then he began working on the problem of permanent images. In 1829, he went into partnership with the bankrupt Niepce and learned all that the latter had done. From there, Daguerre carried on.

He returned to silver compounds, depositing them on a metal plate. When light, reflected from an object, fell on the plate, parts darkened as always, but now Daguerre added something new, thanks to the work of the British astronomer John Frederick William Herschel (1792-1871).

Herschel had pointed out that a solution of the compound sodium thiosulfate (usually called "hypo" by photographers) could dissolve undarkened silver compounds. It did not affect the tiny black grains of silver metal.

After Daguerre got his image of dark on light, he used a sodium thiosulfate wash so that only the dark was left. It formed a permanent image of black against a metal. Of course, the image was black where the real object that had cast the image was white. John Herschel was

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the first to call that a photographic "negative," for that reason.

Daguerre also managed to improve the process by beginning with a copper plate that had been covered by a thin layer of silver. He subjected this to iodine vapor which formed an exceedingly thin layer of silver iodide on the surface. This darkened comparatively rapidly in those places where light struck. The result was a "daguerreotype." The required exposure time was no more than twenty or thirty minutes, which made it practical for the imaging of landscapes, architecture, sculpture and other unmoving objects.

Daguerre revealed his process to scientific bodies on August 19, 1839, and that is usually considered the birthday of practical photography. (Niepce, poor man, had died six years too soon to see this triumph.)

The daguerreotype was quickly improved by other people who rushed into this new and exciting field. By 1841, exposure times had been reduced to a minute or so, and it became practical to make photographs of people.

The fact that daguerreotypes had to be made on pieces of metal made it an expensive process, however.

A British inventor, William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877), had been working on the production of permanent images independently of Daguerre. He coated his silver compounds on thin paper. Although he was making reasonably good images ("talbotypes") as early as 1835, he treated it as a personal hobby and simply amused himself with it. It was not until he heard of Daguerre's report that he hastened to present his own work to the scientific public, and by then he had lost priority.

The images on paper were not as clear as the metal-based daguerrotypes, but they were much cheaper. They had another advantage, too. The daguerreotype formed a photographic negative and that was that. Nothing else could be done with it. Light could, however, be made to shine through the paper negative, and if it shone on another photographic plate it would be reversed again to form what Herschel called a photographic "positive." Indeed, any number of positives could be made.

Talbot took advantage of this fact to publish "The Pencil of Nature" in 1844. It was the first book to include photographs. He could make as many positives out of a single negative as there were copies of the book printed, and every book could have a positive pasted on to an appropriate page that had been left blank for it.

But if paper was better than metal, glass was in some ways better than paper. Glass was rather more expensive than paper, and glass could

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break (and paper could tear or burn), but glass had the great advantage of being very transparent. This meant that positives could be formed on paper with great sharpness and detail.

This was not a factor that was lost on the early photographers. Both Niepce and Daguerre would have used glass, but there seemed no way to make the silver compounds stick to the glass during the complicated process of preparing the photograph. It would either dissolve or be floated off.

It was not until 1847 that a trick was discovered that made the use of glass practical. A Frenchman, Abel Niepce de Saint-Victor, found that egg-white formed a possible base. A layer of egg-white, to which a small quantity of potassium nitrate was added, was placed on a glass plate. After the egg-white had dried a bit, a small quantity of silver nitrate solution was washed over it. This formed silver iodide, which would darken in the light. The egg-white clung firmly to the glass, and the silver iodide was held firmly in the egg-white. Photographs could be taken on glass and excellent positives could be made from it.

The trouble with the egg-white procedure, though, was that it, again, was slow, so that ten to fifteen minutes exposure was required to take the photograph.

In 1851, however, the British inventor Frederick Scott Archer (1813-1857) substituted collodion (nitrocellulose dissolved in ether) for egg-white. If silver iodide was formed in it as in the egg-white method then a photograph could be taken more rapidly than by any other process invented up to that point. The collodion-coated glass plate became the staple of the photographic art for some time to come.

Photography was still difficult, though. The coating for the glass must be prepared in advance, but not too long in advance for it could not be allowed to dry out altogether. What's more, it had to be developed on the spot after exposure, while it was still not yet dry. All the equipment required was bulky, and if photographs were taken in the open, a tent had to be set up within which developing could take place.

Even so, making use of this clumsy "wet-plate" process, the American photographer Matthew B. Brady (1823-1896) took marvelous photographs of the Union army during the Civil War.

Photography was also beginning to be used successfully for astronomic purposes. The British astronomer Warren de la Rue (1815-1889) had invented the first envelope-making machine, and now he grew interested in photography. He was one of the first to photograph the

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Moon, getting a picture so sharp it could be magnified twenty-fold without becoming unacceptably fuzzy. After 1858, he was taking daily pictures of the Sun.

The Italian astronomer Pietro Angelo Secchi (1818-1878) took photographs of the Sun during various phases of an eclipse in 1851 and then set about making numerous photographs of the Moon.

The American astronomer William Cranch Bond (1789-1859) was the first person to photograph something other than the Sun or the Moon. In 1850, he photographed the star Vega, the first ever to have its picture taken.

The race was on, however, to see if, somehow, plates could be smeared with something that could be allowed to become quite dry. If such a "dry-plate" process was invented, plates could be prepared in advance at convenient times and kept for quite a long while before being used. What's more, they would not have to be developed immediately, but could be put aside for development when convenient.

Such a dry-plate process became practical in 1871, thanks to Richard Leach Maddox (1816-1902). What he did was to replace the collodion with gelatin. This could be placed on the plate and dried, and still be used, if silver compounds were formed within it. At first the development time was rather long, but in 1878, it was found that if the gelatin were heated, development was much faster, so much faster, that photography became virtually an instantaneous process.

By 1880, the dry plate process had replaced everything else.

That still left the glass plate, which was rather heavy and fragile. Was there something to substitute, something as thin as paper, but as transparent as glass, and something that was not fragile?

In 1861, the British inventor Alexander Parkes (1813-1890) had devised a method of dissolving pyroxylin (a partially-nitrated cellulose) in a mixture of alcohol and ether, with camphor added to make it softer. When this dried it formed a hard solid that was malleable on heating. Parkes did nothing with this, however.

The American inventor John Wesley Hyatt (1837-1920) improved the process and, in 1869, was manufacturing billiard balls out of it. He called the material "celluloid." It was the first synthetic plastic and could be forced through a narrow slot as it was drying so that it would form a fairly thin and transparent film that could be used for baby rattles, shirt-collars, and so on.

The American inventor George Eastman (1854-1932), anxious to get rid of the glass plates, returned to

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paper at first, but then seized upon celluloid as the film on which photographic emulsions could be placed. The Eastman Company obtained a patent for such film in 1889, and for years had a virtual monopoly of it.

The use of film in place of glass meant cameras could be made small and light. What's more, with a roll of film, you could take one picture after another as the roll advanced, and the whole process of forming the image could be reduced to such simplicity that it was only necessary to push a button.

In 1888, Eastman began selling a small, simple box camera, weighing about two pounds, which he called the Kodak — an easily-memorized nonsense word. It could take a hundred pictures and then it could be sent to Rochester, where the plant was located, and the film would be developed there. The firm would return the developed photographs, together with the camera, newly-charged for another hundred.

Eastman's motto was: "You press the button; we do the rest."

This began the great era of popular photography, when it was no longer reserved for a few skilled professionals, and when one did not have to go to a professional studio for a portrait. People could snap each other readily.

To be sure, cellulose nitrate was very inflammable, and this presented a certain danger. Eastman experimented for years and, in 1924, introduced cellulose acetate, just as good a film as cellulose nitrate, and far less inflammable.

Now you know why one of the great photography firms in the world should be called "Eastman Kodak" and why I ought not to have called the process an "invention of the devil" to the president of the company.

Eastman introduced many enlightened business practices by the way: sickness benefits, retirement annuities, life insurance for his employees, long before such extras became general. He contributed over a hundred million dollars to various educational institutions and endowed dental clinics in various European cities.

In 1932, after a long and successful life, and facing a few last years in loneliness and without the prospect of further accomplishment, Eastman killed himself.

That is the end of the Eastman story, but not of photography. I'll have more to say about it next month.

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This sometimes cruel, sometimes touching story is about . . . well, it is about a leader of early men; it is about the beginnings of rational thought; it is also about, as the author says, the extent to which people will go to be loved . . .

THE KING OF THE NEANDERTHALS

By Wayne Wightman

ON HIS WAY TO THE RIVER for water, Otan looked at the sun and then looked at Isha's shadow. Tiny, mute, and grime-covered, she sat in the dirt in front of the home-cave and played with a rounded stone, rolling it through the loose dirt and looking at the wormy track it left.

First, as usual, as always, Otan had looked at the glare of the sun, and that was that. And then he saw the shadow, and the shadow was just a shadow. But then he saw that the sun caused the shadow, just as Isha's rounded stone rolling in the dirt caused the worm trails. And what if Isha stood up? The shadow would stand up because she did.

And that was how Otan understood the secret of life.

He had lived through only fourteen summers, and knew no one would pay any attention to him until he killed some dangerous horned or tusked animal and then bragged about it. He was still only a Young One. So he did not run shouting and waving his arms to the Old Ones, who sat work-

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ing in the cave. But Isha would listen to him.

He set down his water carrier and nudged her arm.

Isha was beside last night's smoldering fire, outside the cave that Otan's grandfather had helped dig into the cliff face many seasons past, before Otan was born. Isha sat cross-legged in the dirt, apparently unaware of him, and played with her rounded stone. Nearby, two scrawny children dug a small hole with a stick and dropped bugs into it, which they then crushed and ate.

"Isha," he whispered, "I know a secret." He glanced again at the rising sun and at Isha's shortening shadow.

She clicked. She had been born with no tongue, but Otan could sometimes understand what she tried to say. Though he was only a year older than Isha, he could remember how the Old Ones would pry open her mouth with their thick fingers to gape and probe the huge emptiness contained in her small head. And she had always been so small — even now only half Otan's size.

"It's a big secret," he said softly. "I just found out."

Isha looked up from her stone. Old dirt lined her dark eyes. They were so black that when she was a child, the Old Ones said she would be blind and should be thrown in the river. But she was not. It seemed to Otan that she carried two pieces of night inside her eyes.

"It's a secret I learned," he whispered, "from what I said to myself inside my head." He turned his back to the cave mouth, where the women and the Old Ones worked. When the hunters were gone, Otan's older sister, White Eye the Speaker, ruled sternly. If she saw Otan talking to Isha when he was supposed to be going for water, he would be whipped.

But he would survive the whipping because, even now, Otan could look back at the cave and at the fire and across the clearing down to the river, and then farther away across the plain at the thin line that was the black tangle of forest — and everywhere he saw the workings of his secret. He squatted next to her. "Listen," he said, "I know why things happen."

White Eye would have him whipped and make burns on him if she knew he even thought such things. She was Speaker for The Power, and she said that her one white eye was the eye of The Power, through which she was shown what the clan should do.

"The Power doesn't make things happen," he whispered very softly, so White Eye and the Old Ones wouldn't hear. "*Things* make things happen."

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She cocked her head slightly, looked puzzled, and her black eyes showed him those huge chunks of night.

"It's so easy. Listen: Things happen. . . ." Suddenly he realized he didn't have the word for it — there *wasn't* a word for it. He had to make up a sound for what he meant. "Things happen *because* other things happen. When Kapak throws his spear and it goes into the heart of the bear, the bear dies *because* Kapak made the spear go there, not because Kapak spoke to The Power the night before."

Isha's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Just as your shadow on the ground grows smaller *because* the sun is higher, the bear died *because* the spear went into its heart."

White Eye barked at him from the cave. "Leave the stupid one alone! Go to the river and bring water!"

At the river, standing with his feet sinking into pebbly sand, Otan saw the world designed with *what if* and *because*. Water flowed . . . because it went from higher to lower, like rain, like all water. In quiet places along the river, green and gold ducks bobbed and drifted, and they floated . . . because they had feathers. So what if Otan gathered feathers in a wide skin, and what if he lay across it? He would float like a duck across the water and not drown.

Everywhere — between the fish and birds and leaves and sticks that floated, between the wind and the reeds, between the blazing white sun and the green-dark line of forest so far away, between everything he saw the *because* that linked them in an intimacy as slick and neat as that between his eyelid and his eye, and hovering over all these things was the ghost of *what if*, and there the shape of the future was revealed. He had new eyes.

He hefted the water-filled pig bladder out of the river and carried it dribbling back up the rutted bank to the cave mouth.

White Eye threw a rabbit skin at him. "Clean this. Do work or go hungry."

Otan sat and slumped — to be confined here in smoke-smelling gloom with the snorting and wheezing of the Old Ones, their runny eyes and spit-slicked lips, constantly licking in bleary concentration — to be here was a curse when he felt like the sky was about to open and the future come pouring out on him.

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"Tell me what you whispered to the stupid one," White Eye said as she cut a strip of hide into narrow strings.

"Nothing . . . about shadows and the sun.' He tried to appear intent on the rabbit skin.

"Why speak to the stupid one? Tell me what you said."

"She isn't stupid. She understands as well as anyone."

Otan's sister tilted her face upward and stared at him with her one bright chalk-white eye. Tell me what you told her, or I will ask The Power to punish you."

Otan studiously scraped at the sheen of fat on the underside of the skin.

Behind him, one of the Old Ones hit him in the back of the neck with a stick. "Answer!" an Old One barked. Pain arced through the back of his skull, and his head snapped forward. Even here he saw the *because* of the pain. "The Power hurts you for disrespect," said the Old One from behind him.

Otan's ears rang. "*You* hurt me," he said. "Because you hit me, I was hurt." Peripherally, he could see Isha, still sitting by last night's fire, carefully watching him and White Eye.

White Eye craned her head forward from her shoulders, like a vulture. "What is this noise you make . . . bee-cauzz?"

From her sitting position, Oldest Woman lazily kicked Otan on the knee. "He speaks like a madman," she said to the others. "He speaks in noises." Several of them laughed. One of the children threw a pebble at Otan, and it bounced off the side of his face.

He scraped fat and muscle fiber from the back of the rabbit skin with the others. "It is a sound to mean that one thing makes another thing happen. I hurt because you hit me."

"I hit you," Oldest Woman jabbered. "I hit you, but The Power makes you hurt. The Power makes things happen, all things. Without The Power, nothing moves, nothing. You —"

White Eye backhanded Oldest Woman across the chest. "The Power sees you, Otan," she said, her white eye widening and blazing at him like the full moon in the gloom of the cave. "I see what The Power shows me, Otan, and I see you being stripped of your skin and Oldest Woman sucking the softness out of your bones, and I see Abo drinking from the bone in your head. You insult The Power, Little Brother."

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Otan worked at his skin and said nothing. He glanced up once and saw Isha quickly look sideways at him, and then slowly begin rolling her stone in her hands.

"The stupid one likes you," Oldest Woman said, and then made a phlegmy laugh. "With her, you could have stupid babies that wouldn't bother you with talking!' Now the others made coarse, wheezy laugher and pounded the ground with their gnarled fists.

Later, as he worked quietly, Otan saw clumsy Okichi hold a strip of hide between his teeth and his toes while he scraped it with a stick. The length of hide vibrated as the stick worked back and forth across it. Then Okichi fumbled, and the tension in the strip of hide made the stick flip against the wall of the cave.

Otan understood the *because* of it. And then he saw the *what if*. And then he saw the future.

FOR THE next handful of days, Otan left the cave at dawn and did not return until dusk. When White Eye questioned and threatened him, he said he was hunting small game.

"He becomes strange," one of the Old Ones said during the dark evening while they watched the small fire and chewed a few bits of the remaining dried meat.

In the back of the cave, where the air was still and heavy with the smell of sweat and smoke, Otan and Isha leaned together for warmth. Her small forehead leaned against his shoulder and made a warm place between them.

"He is burden for the Hunters."

"And for us. He eats our food."

"He is crazy," White Eye said. "The Power showed me this."

Otan sat up and leaned forward. "Remember what White Eye says," Otan said. His voice sounded like a mouse squeak in his own ears. "Remember what The Power says of me, that I am crazy."

In the flickering of the small fire, Okichi gazed steadily at him. "Don't ridicule The Power, Otan. It will make you die. The Hunters will be back in two days, and we'll tell them that you insulted The Power. You put us all in danger.

Smoke swirled through the cave and blew out into the night. "I am not afraid of The Power. There is no Power. It is a lie."

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Oldest Woman quickly turned and threw a handful of dirt at Otan. Isha squealed and buried her face against Otan and frantically tried to clear her eyes. Otan squinted and ignored his own pain. He would let his face betray nothing to them. He put his arm around Isha and held her closer. "Remember," he said, "that I am crazy."

White Eye looked at him in horror, and then rolled her eyes back in her head and began to jabber and yank at her stringy hair. The Old Ones sat rapt as they listened to the jumbled words of The Power that poured through her frothy lips, but Otan heard only the burbling voice of air over a wet tongue.

The next day he left the cave at dawn. Before the sun was half across the sky, he returned with a freshly killed pig. He threw it in the dirt before the open-mouthed Old Ones. The sticklike children rushed toward it, but then held back, glancing fearfully at their elders. The pig was enough to feed all of them for two days.

"Remember," Otan said, "The Power says I am crazy."

He stalked away toward the river, and at dusk he returned dragging a heavy running-bird by the neck. Again he stopped in front of the Old Ones, their faces gleaming with pig fat, and let the running-bird's heavy head drop in the dirt in front of them with a dull thud.

He saw White Eye glaring at him, her mouth stopped in mid-chew. Otan pulled the raw pig thigh from her fingers and said, "The Power says I am crazy. Remember that. Yet I fill your belly. Where is Isha?" He dropped the pig meat in the dirt in front of her.

White Eye twitched her head sideways at the cave mouth as she snatched up her food.

Inside, in the back, he found Isha huddled in their sleeping place, sucking on a small, naked bone. "They don't let you eat?"

She only looked at him.

He took her hand and led her out of the cave, into the sunlight, away from all of them.

As they left, Otan heard the Old Ones whispering, "He is a Hunter now." "But The Power says he is crazy." "Maybe he will kill the stupid one for us." "Give me that." And then their raspy voices were gobbled up in the wet sounds of desperate eating.

* * *

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Abo and the other five Hunters returned on the second evening following. They carried thick slabs of dark meat from the animals they had chased off cliffs and had then butchered. Flies rode on the meat and on their faces. When they stood in front of the cave mouth, they stared at the six fish, each as long as Abo's arm, and the piles of fresh bird and pig meat. Otan stood away from the opening, beside the smoldering fire. He had been observing how a piece of meat dried and darkened in the coals. Isha crouched near him, breathing in the smells of the hot meat and watching him carefully.

"Who hunts?" Abo demanded. He was the leader of the Hunters, huge and loud, his barrel chest wrapped in skins and then wrapped with leather cords, making him look even more massive. The right side of his face had been disfigured when he had been caught in a rockfall, and now sweat coursed down the grooves in his cheeks. "Where did this come from?"

Otan stood and waited for White Eye or one of the Old Ones to answer.

Finally Oldest Woman mumbled, "Otan," as she slowly chewed and brown drool slicked her chin.

"Otan *who*?" Otan called over to her. Abo looked toward him, then back to the eating Old Ones.

"Otan," she said, "the one The Power says is crazy."

"Otan," Abo barked, "where did you find this?"

"I found the fish in the river, and the pigs in the brush on the plain. And I did not do ritual to make The Power kill them for me. I killed them myself, without help from The Power."

The Hunters behind Abo dropped the black meat on the ground, but Abo stared into Otan's eyes as he stalked toward him.

"He says there is no Power," White Eye announced, coming forward and cocking her head so that her one pale eye gleamed large in the cave mouth. "He is poison!"

"You did not kill these," Abo said. "The Power killed these."

Isha moved away from Otan and the cave, away from everyone, to the edge of the clearing.

"There is no Power," Otan said. "I did these things myself."

Smelling of dried blood and sweat, Abo stood in front of Otan, a full head taller. "How did you get this food?"

"I hunted it. I killed it with hands and thinking. Then I brought it here."

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Abo swung one of his heavy-muscled arms against the side of Otan's head. He tried to duck, but was hit anyway and staggered sideways, across the smoldering fire, and then went down. He heard the fire singe the hair off his legs.

"You lie to me. You're too weak to kill this much food."

Otan's eyes wouldn't focus as he tried to get his arms and legs under him. "I hunted alone, without The Power," he managed to say. "I thought, and then I hunted."

Abo kicked his skin-wrapped foot into Otan's side, and when Otan rolled choking onto his back, Abo stood over him and let spit fall from his lips onto Otan's face.

"There is Power," Abo said. "The Power touches all things and is in all things. It lets us live.' He walked the dozen steps back to the cave mouth and kicked dirt on the stacked fish and pig meat. "You lie to me, and your insults to The Power put us all in danger. Because of you, we could all die."

Now on his hands and knees, Otan could just begin to draw his breath. He saw Isha staring at him with wide, night-filled eyes, her lips drawn back in a grimace of fear. "It would take a long time to die with this much food," Otan said.

Abo rushed back at him and kicked him — a deliberate, measured kick with the top of his foot just below Otan's ribs that was hard enough to lift the boy off the ground. He fell like boneless meat into the dirt and vomited.

"The Power would punish me if I did not punish you," Abo said. "He is poison," he announced to the clan.

"And the stupid one," White Eye said. "She is with him."

"They are both poison."

And that was that. They were abandoned.

Isha scurried to his side and helped him drag himself away, toward the river and a sheltering stand of trees and rocks. Later, when he was able to stand, they moved on, and Otan picked their way carefully through the moonlit rocks, along the moon-sparkled river, toward the camp he had set up the preceding day. Embers smoldered between two tall, hand-shaped slabs of stone. There was also firewood, and hidden under leaves and branches were his bow and arrows.

"They say we are poison," he said.

Isha made the swift outward thrust with her hand that meant she was

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pleased — then she held herself tight against his chest, and with each breath, she softly hummed.

Using his bow and arrows, he hunted, and they ate well. He skinned and dried small animals, and, two days after he had left the clan, seeing how a skin draped over a bending branch, he understood that one might stitch several skins together and fit them over a structure of branches, making a tent, and thus not have to find a cave or hunt or fight for one or spend months gouging out a new one. The Hunters were always bound to their caves and had to travel far to hunt — but with such a shelter of skins . . . with such a thing, one could travel to where game was plentiful. One would be free.

By the end of the fourth day, they had made one and slept warmer at night then they could remember since they were children.

Slowly, winter closed around the land, and the river grew smaller and slower, and sheets of ice formed along its edges. When the first snow fell, it formed a crust over their tent, and inside, the heat from their bodies warmed the air.

By midwinter they were being watched. By now the Others, as he thought of them, would have run out of food, or they would be parceling out what few tiny bits remained, with the Hunters getting the largest shares so they would stay strong enough to hunt. And he knew how small would be the game they returned with . . . mice and rats, and only sometimes could they steal a larger animal from the wild dogs that had already killed it.

The Old Ones would get the smallest portions, and sometimes — twice that Otan could remember — when an Old One died, the corpse would provide food for the rest of them.

In times of hunger, everyone would sit motionless and murmur chants to The Power to rescue them. But this winter, Isha and Otan ate two or three times a day because now he knew the secret of killing at a distance. Before, during winter, everyone had grown thin and hollow-eyed — but now Otan watched muscle grow thick over his bones, and at night he did not go to sleep chewing on sticks, nor awaken and listen to his empty stomach beg for food.

In recent days, several of the Old Ones would huddle together on the bank of the river and watch him return to his shelter dragging a jackal or a

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vulture behind him. Sometimes there were dark-eyed children with them, and sometimes Otan would hold up his kill and yell at them.

"I am Otan, the Crazy One, cursed by The Power! This is Isha, the Stupid One! The Power punishes us by stretching our bellies with food!"

Then he would gut the animal and sling the steaming entrails at them. They would fall over each other as they plowed through the snow to grab what they could and shove it in their mouths.

Afterward he would watch the sticklike arms of the trampled children pull themselves up to look blearily around and pick at specks of bloody snow with their thin, slow fingers and put the specks on their tongues to melt into nourishment. This did not give Otan pleasure. He remembered hunger too well.

Otan silently stood in the snow within shouting distance of the cave mouth. At his feet, he dropped the frozen carcasses of two vultures, and in his hands, he held his bow and arrows. He stood and he waited.

Within minutes, all eyes were turned in his direction, but they did not look at him — they stared at the food in the snow at his feet. Overhead, two crows flew beneath the heavy sky, and then veered toward the river.

"Who am I?" Otan shouted.

"Otan," came a thin voice from the cave.

"Otan *who*!" he demanded.

"Otan the. . . ." The voice faded before the last word.

"I am Otan the Not Hungry, I am Otan of Hands and Thoughts!"

A dark shape came forward out of the shadow. "You are Otan the Poison One!" Abo shouted at him. "Leave us! We feed our own!"

"You feed *on* your own. Who has died this winter?" Otan called at them. "White Eye? Are you there?"

He heard a distant "Yes." And then her wild face appeared, her hair huge around her head, and her eye glowing in the darkness of the cave.

"Leave us, Poison One!" Abo raged, waving a fist at him and coming out into the snow. His breath billowed huge and white around him, as though he were on fire. "If we are hungry, The Power wants us to be hungry. The Power sent you to tempt us, so we will all die! Go away!" He picked up his spear and shook it at Otan. "Leave! Take your poison food!" Beneath his wide, dark eyes, the damaged side of his face was streaked pink and white with rage and cold.

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"Oldest Woman, are you alive?" Otan shouted.

There was no answer.

"Oldest Woman, are you food in Abo's belly?"

"Poison One!" Abo raged. "The Power will make you die!"

"Did you eat most of her, Abo, Eater of Old Women?"

He ran heavily at Otan, holding the spear low, and then drawing it back at his side.

"Make him die!" White Eye screamed from behind. "Great Power, make him die!"

Otan fixed an arrow in his bow. "Abo, you are beloved of The Power! The Power lets you eat old women."

Abo plowed toward him, snow spraying up around his knees, and his breath billowing behind him like smoke. "The Power will make the Poison One die!"

Otan drew back the arrow and let the cold strip of taut hide press into his cheek. "There is no Power but hands and thoughts," he said, loud enough for Abo to hear. "Your Power makes food of all of you." And then he let the arrow fly like a bird and bury its beak in Abo's chest.

Abo ran two more slowing steps, stopped and looked down at the arrow sticking out of him. He stared at it a moment, his face going suddenly white, and then he gripped it with his hands and ripped it savagely from his chest. Now he was close enough that Otan could see the separate drops of blood falling into the disturbed snow. Otan notched another arrow on the bowstring.

Abo waved the bloody arrow in Otan's direction and bellowed, "You will make The Power kill us all!" He lifted the spear to his shoulder, and when he took a deep breath to gather his strength enough to throw it, blood burbled out of his chest.

Otan sent another arrow at Abo. It struck him in the front of his throat, just below his chin. Abo's eyes widened, and he reached up with his other hand, gripped the shaft, and wrenched it out, and his bellowing scream turned into a spewing gargle of blood and steam blowing out of his neck. Otan notched another arrow.

Abo waved his hands as though trying to explain, and Otan observed how, as Abo waved the bloody arrows at him, as their tips moved in arcs through the air, they slung arcs of blood on the snow. Even in death, there was order and connection.

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Behind Abo, in the cave mouth, the others watched their leader drop to his knees in the snow. Otan slowly released the tension in the bowstring and watched Abo die and fall forward on his face.

Then White Eye broke from the cave and ran screaming at him, her fisted hands raised curved over her head like horns. Her black mouth opened wide enough for a scream that could be heard across the world, yet she made no sound except for the soft whisking of the snow around her legs as she ran. She did not even seem to breathe.

She ignored the collapsed body of Abo and came at Otan. When she was nearly in his face, the bellowing scream that she had held inside her was released in a torrent of noise so furious that Otan thought she might explode. Steam poured from her mouth, and when her white eye seemed as huge before him as the moon, he took one step aside and slugged her on the back of the head.

She fell like a dead person, facedown in the snow. After a dozen heartbeats, she pushed herself up with her arms and rolled over on her back. Her eye, icy and blank like snow, stared at him, as though she wanted to consume him in the whiteness of her gaze.

Otan picked up the two vultures he had brought for the clan and then threw them on top of Abo. "You may eat what you want."

THAT EVENING, just before darkness, Otan heard many feet crunching in the snow outside his tent. When he looked out, the entire clan faced him. One of the old women shuffled forward. She wore a scrap of skin around her head, and her thin, grizzled hair surrounded her face like brambles.

"We came —" She broke off and shuffled closer, never looking up from her snow-swallowed feet. "We came to tell you that you are our leader." Then she took a single step backward.

In the silence between them, far down the river in a bare tree that was black against the lowering clouds, a crow rasped its cry. Then one of the Old Ones cleared his throat and spit steaming mucus into the snow.

"Our leader," he agreed without enthusiasm.

"Why am I your leader?"

"You are strong. You have The Power in you."

"There is no Power," Otan said. "The Power is your excuse for weakness. I have in me only the power of hands and thoughts."

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"Hands and thoughts," Oldest Woman mumbled absently. "Yes, hands and thoughts and those other things you say. You feed us. You are our leader."

Behind the Old Ones, dark-eyed children mewed. "Feed us," one of them whined.

Otan nodded to Isha, and she dragged a large rodent carcass from their tent. Otan threw it at the old woman's feet. "Only the children may eat this. You have already gorged." The adults looked guiltily away, pulling up their shoulder skins to hide their fat-smeared faces.

As soon as the carcass hit the snow, the children fell on it and tore it apart, chewing and swallowing the skin and hair in chunks, clawing open its belly, devouring the entrails, and finally snapping the small bones between their teeth.

"If I am your leader," Otan said, "White Eye is not your Speaker."

"No, no," several of them agreed. "Not a Speaker. Not anymore."

For two days, White Eye sat wordless in the farthest corner of the cave, her face downturned, and her wild hair pulled forward, keeping her eyes from the light. Several of the Old Ones brought her water and scraps of food, but she ignored them, making no gesture, making no move at all except for the smallest rise and fall of her shoulders as she breathed.

Otan showed the Hunters his bow and arrows and how the feathers of birds helped the arrow fly. The first two days, he showed them how he hunted, and both days they brought back more rabbits and vultures and small pigs than the clan could eat, and when they returned on the second day, the hunters shouting and hooting and swinging their kill around their heads, the Old Ones sat unexcited and sullen around their small fire, picking at their hands and drawing aimless patterns in the dirt between their feet.

"Where is Isha?" Otan demanded of them after one quick look into the cave. "Where is White Eye?"

"Gone," someone mumbled.

"Where?" Otan cuffed the Old One hard enough to knock her backward. "Where did they go?"

"White Eye took her. They left. That way." She pointed down the river.

Otan felt part of himself on the edge of death. It was like a mistake in the design of his world . . . if only he could leave the camp and come

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back in . . . if he could just rehear the Old One's words . . . there had to be a mistake.

"She said The Power would kill us if we stopped her," the Old One muttered.

"*There is no Power!*" Otan screamed in the Old One's face. "I could kill you all!" Quickly, he turned to the Hunters. "Find Isha. All of you — separate and search for her. If you find White Eye, you may kill her or bring her back, but bring Isha unharmed to me — by tonight. Go now —*run!*"

The Hunters silently dropped the prey Otan had killed for them, and then trudged away toward the river muttering to each other.

During the night and through the next morning, one by one, they returned, with neither of the women nor any word of signs of them. Otan sent the men out again after they had eaten, and for a handful of days following. While they were gone, he hunted enough for the ones left behind. But when the Hunters again returned, the word was the same, and a pall settled over the clan.

Otan decided that he must begin to think.

After teaching the men how to hunt with bows and arrows, he taught the women how to cut and sew skins so that they would fit over a framework of poles. Then he moved the camp two days downriver, to the place where it would have been easy for White Eye to turn onto the plain and travel toward the unknown lands beyond the forest. As the clan stood there for the first time, looking at this new place, confused and troubled, Otan told them not to be afraid, that he would keep them safe and that there would be no hunger.

"But you are still a child!" one of the Old Ones lamented, digging her fingers into her cheeks and pulling her face long and horrible. She began to hoot and gabble prayers to The Power.

"But I am the one who thinks," Otan said.

"Why are we here? Why have we left our home?" another cried, gazing onto the vast expanse of the plain, its waist-high brush and its endless flatness. "The Power will make us die."

Otan slapped the gibbering Old One across the face. "There is no Power," he said. "What you think is God are the jumbled words in your head. You confuse the glimmerings of *what if* and *because* with the voice

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of God. When I let you go hungry, then you may jabber your prayers. Until then, let me explain to you just once: shut up."

The Old Ones were sullen and reluctant to put up their tents.

In disgust, Otan left them. An hour later he returned with a small gazelle and threw it on the dirt in front of them. They ripped it apart and fed, and afterward they set up their tents and gazed at the river and the plains and admired their new home.

Since only two men could now hunt for the entire clan, Otan instructed the remaining men to go as scouts to find other people, to give them food, and to ask them to join the clan of Otan, where they could eat their fill every day. Still, since the clan had moved, nothing of Isha had been mentioned.

And through the year, as the clan grew from eleven to over a hundred, Otan often crossed the river and walked out on the wide plain and observed and thought. He had seen that on the ground, around certain plants, seeds grew into more of the same plant, and that if he collected these seeds, he could make them grow nearly anywhere he chose.

When he returned one day, the men asked what Otan wanted them to do, and he set them to collecting and planting berry- and seed-bearing plants. At first there was again talk that he was crazy. Then, in spring, they began to revere him.

When they were all well-fed, and fat had covered the knobs and angles of their bones, he sent thirty men out across the plain toward the black line of distant forest to look for White Eye and Isha. They were to return in one hundred days unless they found her. No one returned early, and nothing was learned. After the thirtieth man had returned, Otan announced that the clan would become larger by another hundred, and the next day, the same thirty men went out in all directions to invite others to join.

By midwinter the clan of Otan numbered over two hundred, and this time he sent one hundred men out across the plain, and they were to be gone two hundred days, unless they found Isha.

On the 150th day, a man named Big Hands returned. "Yes," he said, "they were seen. Isha and White Eye, across, on the far side of the forest, where there is a great river." He turned and pointed. "A river so wide, it is like a sky that flows across the earth. The people there say they saw two

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women, one such as White Eye, two summers ago, but now they are gone. No one knows where."

Otan stared at Big Hands, amazed that he could feel such joy and rage and anticipation and disappointment at the same time. He had at last come closer to finding Isha, but had learned so little.

"I stayed six days," Big Hands mumbled, "but no one knew where they went. Or what direction." He looked down to avoid Otan's gaze. "They were just . . . gone."

Otan did not mention Isha again, and seemed to turn his attention to other things. He instructed men to capture young antelope and to bring them unharmed to camp. There they were tethered and fed, and everyone gathered to stare.

He announced, "This animal will be kept alive until winter. Then it will provide food. If you wish to capture more, you may."

The clan was amazed at his cleverness, and within weeks, nine animals were kept at the edge of camp.

"Otan," Big Hands once asked him as they stood on the plain in the purpling twilight, "how do you think?"

"I look into the world for the *because* and the *what if.*"

"I don't understand."

"A log rolls down a hill because it is round. A round stone rolls because it is pushed. What if I cut two small ends from a log. . . ." He knelt and scratched a drawing in the hard dirt with a stone. "And what if I connected them with a straight tree limb. . . ." He looked at Big Hands's face, but Big Hands showed only puzzlement. "And what if I put a basket here, in the middle, and then pushed it."

Big Hands stared at the drawing. "It would . . . roll? Like a pushed stone?"

"Yes. That's how I think."

"Why would we want such a thing?"

"To move the village to the great river."

Once warm weather came, the village moved. Amid endless grief and complaining and howling to The Power to protect them, the carts were loaded with the oldest people, the surplus of hides, the disassembled frames for their tents, and the bone and stone tools the village had accumulated.

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Halfway across the plain, when the land surrounded them like an empty dream and circling birds waited for them to die, Otan waved some of the men away from a cart, and in their place tied one of the food animals to it. When the animal was led forward, the cart rolled along behind it, and after a moment of stunned silence, the cheering began. But Otan thought only of Isha, and though he did not mention her name, everyone knew the purpose of their move.

After two handfuls of days, they reached the forest, and all but the Hunters traveled in fear and wonder. The sky was hidden from them — never had this happened before — and everywhere birds swooped and sang at them, screeched and fluttered, fanning wide their brilliant wings as they perched on branches and stared down at them with red and golden eyes.

Otan led them farther, until the forest opened and the sky again reached down to the earth.

"Here," he said, "will be our new village. We will call it Home." The river moved past their feet as silently as the sun, and along the shore, in the weeds and rushes and clumps of brushy trees, there were strange birds such as they had never seen, even in the forest . . . birds the color of sunset; tall, sticklike birds; birds that were all flash and plumage; and in the river, fat, heavy animals bobbed below the surface like great floating stones. Across the glassy surface, beyond the far shore, on the far edge of the world, lay a rim of golden mountains, like a halo of burning air.

THROUGH THE next weeks, in his wanderings, Otan gathered fruit seeds from the trees downriver and planted them around the tents of Home. He saw how insects built tall mounds of rock-hard mud, and soon his people were building mud-block houses. Other clans joined, stragglers in ones and twos, until, by the end of their second year there, the village numbered more than five hundred. With them, they brought their gods, but with Otan's words, Big Hands told them that their gods must live outside the village, for here the only power was the power of hands and thoughts, and Otan was its Speaker.

There was grumbling, and at night, gathered around small fires in their mud houses, they mumbled chants to their small idols.

At a celebration of his eighteenth year, he was presented with a crown of feathers, and after stuffing themselves with food, the Old Ones told stories about the Years of Cold and Hunger and how the young Otan had

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fed and warmed them. In the evening, their fires filled the moist, warm air off the river with pungent smells of smoke. As his gift to them, he showed them how to put meat on a stick and roast it over the fire. Then the sounds of sizzling fat and laughter and eating spilled from the village across the plain of water.

Otan thanked the assembled population, and then spoke quietly of his new plan. "From this day forward, all men who reach their fifteenth summer will leave the village for one year. With cooked meat, they can travel far, and they must travel as far as they can. When they return, they will tell us of the lands and people and animals they have seen." Otan paused, and inside his eyes he saw her face for the hundredth time that day. "And when they meet any person, they will ask about White Eye and Isha and bring me news."

He turned and left them and resigned himself to the grief he knew he would feel for the mere utterance of her name. Behind him, he heard Big Hands say to the crowd, "That is all. Eat and be happy that Otan is our leader!" The celebration was muted, but when that summer began, thirty-seven young men gathered their stone knives, bows, arrows, spears, and bags of food, and spread across the land.

Otan slept and dreamed of Isha as taller, fuller, probably the mother of children. There was a dry place in him, always a dry place, and only she would be water to his desert.

That winter, Otan instructed the men in the building of a log tower, and there he sat long hours watching for the return of the clan's young men. Most of them eventually came back, sometimes bringing other clans with them, and Otan's first question was about Isha — but none of them had found out anything regarding her.

The next year, to pass the time, he supervised the planting of grain-fields on the outskirts of the village, but when the second year's young men returned from their wanderings, they brought back only a few stragglers and exciting stories of adventures, strange animals, and mountains covered with fields of ice.

By the third spring of the search, the trees planted in the village bore sweet yellow fruit, the cleared fields were rich with grains and tuberous plants, and the Old Ones had grown fat and spent their days embroidering their stories about the old times, the dark times of fear and cold and hunger.

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Yet still, after the village fire had crackled into silence, one could hear the murmur of pleading chants from inside their mud-block houses. Otan grew tired of thinking for them, and he spent many of his days alone, atop the tower, waiting for word from his wandering scouts.

And this time, this season, there was news.

"She's coming!" the boy said. He was a thin, wiry boy, the son of one of last year's stragglers. On his arms, freshly healed cuts flushed bright red with his excitement. "Zega comes with her! He brings her, probably tomorrow! And White Eye, they drag her along, too. I saw them both, Otan."

"How does Isha look?" His throat was tight, and he could only look at the boy and think, *Those eyes have seen her — he has seen her face and her eyes and how she walks.* "Is she well? Is she mated to someone? Does she have children?"

"She is small, Otan. With large eyes. And she has no husband. And she remembers you." He waved his arms like a struggling bird: "She is . . . is . . . healthy and. . . ." He struggled with words. ". . .and has big eyes and . . . and Zega brings her tomorrow."

"Was she glad to hear of me?"

"She remembers you, Otan. She wept to hear your name. But I couldn't understand her noises. She has lived far that way, by a lake, with White Eye, and was her servant. White Eye was a sorcerer to stupid people."

"What did you tell her about us?"

"I told her of the wonders here, of the food and the tower and the trees and houses, and White Eye said we lied. Her face, Otan, her eyes, are so strange, but we beat her till she didn't scare us anymore."

"Go to your parents. They want to see you."

"Yes, Leader."

Otan bathed himself and cursed the slowness of the sun and waited at the top of the tower. Big Hands brought him food and water, and through the night, Otan looked down on the village, the mud-brick houses, the vines that grew across their walls, the pale fruit hanging on the many trees like smudged stars far below him, and in the silence he could hear occasional chanting from some houses where small fires burned, where his people groveled in front of odd-shaped stones or old memories . . . as he had groveled before the memory of Isha. And now they would be together. He would look on her face. He would hear her voice. He would hold

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her small hands in his own, and nothing else would matter.

By midday, everyone waited outside their houses, most of them along the wide path that led from the river through the middle of Home and to the foot of the tower. When Zega appeared, a cheer went up, and all eyes turned to the foot of the tower, where Otan, clean and smooth, stood wearing his feathered crown.

Stooped and shuffling like a slave, Isha followed Zega between the lines of villagers. She was smaller than Otan remembered, wiry, wrapped in stringy soot-black hides, filthy, and hid her face in the crook of her thin arm. She wouldn't look where she was going, and when she veered into the crowd, Zega had to nudge her back to the middle of the path. Her only reaction was to further hunch up her shoulders and push her face deeper into the bend of her arm.

Behind Isha, another of the young men dragged White Eye by a thick leather leash. Her hands had been tied behind her, and the young man tried to get her to stand and walk into Home — but White Eye dropped to her knees and rolled onto her side and struggled to get her teeth on the leash or to kick the boy who dragged her, and like the moon flashing through the branches of a tree, her pale eye flashed at Otan, bigger, whiter, more dangerous-looking than he remembered.

He went forward to meet Isha, and when he wrapped his arm around her, he said, "I am Otan, remember? Look at me."

Her eyes were the eyes of an animal resigned to death — wide and hopeless, the thoughts behind them paralyzed with fear. When she made harsh croaking noises, Otan held his ear close and tried to remember how to understand her. She made noises in her throat again, and he finally understood some of it.

"Isha," he said, "we are not going to kill you. White Eye lied. I am Otan. Remember me."

Her black eyes focused on his face, and deep creases gathered between her eyebrows.

"Isha. . . ."

Behind them, children giggled and poked sticks at White Eye, and the Old Ones kicked dirt on her. Otan drew her closer to Isha and listened carefully. As she made her noises, she looked over his head at the tower, and her eyes followed the scaffolding to the top.

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"I told them how to build the tower. It was from there that I watched for your return. I showed them how to hunt while they searched. Many people live here — it is a great clan now. It was all done to find you."

She wanted to know what the square caves were. They frightened her.

"We had more people than caves, so I showed them how to build with mud and straw."

For a long moment, she stared into his face. Otan's eyes moved from her long, straight hair to the two parallel lines across her forehead that had not been there years before — two lines like the separate paths of their lives. And behind her eyes, those disks of blackness in which he saw the distorted shape of his face — what did she remember of him, what did she see now? And what had he become? Would she be the person she had been? Nothing else had remained the same — why should they?

She bent her head and allowed him to lead her to his house. The village cheered as one, the women hooting and whistling, the children shrieking and throwing dirt in the air, and the men making explosive booming noises from their chests up through their throats.

Mashed grains, fruits, meats, and berry juices had been neatly placed inside Otan's house. When Isha entered, she cowered and peered up at the interlaced branches that supported the woven reeds.

"It won't fall," Otan said. "You're safe here, with me. No animals to hurt you, no cold, no hunger."

She studied him with those eyes that seemed never to fill, that simply opened and allowed all things of the world to fall into them. Then, quickly, she turned, dropped to her knees, and began eating everything within reach — raw and cooked birds, fruit, tubers — she smelled the mashed grain, touched her mouth to it, and then swallowed dripping handfuls. Otan watched her, the half-starved woman of his dreams, the queen of his heart, and wondered if his breathlessness, the fist-sized knot in his throat, and his racing heart would ever let him speak to her as he once had, about ordinary things, about the sun and the river, about nothing. Here he was in a sleepless dream, unable to speak to the woman whose memory had driven him — and all of Home — for the past five years.

As quickly as she had begun eating, she stopped, wiped her hands on her clothes, curled in a corner, and slept. Otan slumped against the wall, slid his back down it, and watched her. He could not believe that he was alive, that air passed in and out of his chest, that he could see the light

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of the sun as it illuminated the angles and curves of the woman he loved, that it shone on the flat of her cheek, making it glow like the sun on the plain at midday, and that the brown skin over her ribs showed through her wrap like the islands of sand that sometimes appeared in the river. She was the land, the air, and the water of his life. Even her fingers spread against the dirt floor like promontories of life against the lifeless. The desert in his heart would bloom, now that she was home.

HE AWAKENED to see her sitting and watching him. Without moving, he gazed at her, wondering if he really saw her or only dreamed he was awake. "Isha," he said, "the days are ours. Everything is ours!"

She crawled across to him, snuggled against his side, and made a noise in her throat, the noise that meant *No.*

"You're safe here," Otan said. "I made this village so the clan would have a place to live while we searched for you. You're here now, and all this is yours. Ours."

She shook her head. She made noises, slowly, sound by sound, that meant, "No. While I slept, The Power said that I must leave." Her cheek was warm on his skin, smooth, and he remember now, after so long, the smell of her skin. Bit by bit, she said, "If I stay here, I will soon die. There is no Power here. Only The Power has kept me alive so long."

Otan gazed across at the dirt floor and the mud blocks and felt his life begin to slip away. But how could he not understand her? She had kept him alive, though they had been separated by years and many days of distance. Though she had been gone, she had given him a purpose and a reason to go on. If he found himself in a place where Isha couldn't have lived, he, too, would have to leave. So it was not a difficult decision. "If you can't live here," he said, "we will leave."

Otan collected his arrows and his bow, his stone knife, his four warmest skins, the largest piece of cooked meat, and led her out into the smoky night air of Home.

Big Hands had been watching Otan's house, and when he saw Otan walk toward the great river with food and skins, he ran toward him and said, "Leader, where are you going?"

"Away. Home is yours now. I have Isha now, so we will leave."

"But—" His face twisted as though he had been struck. "But what

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will we do? What will we do with White Eye?"

"If I were you, I would kill her and throw her into the river. Tell everyone good-bye." And they walked away.

As they pushed through thickets and the moon shone white and round in the black sky above them, they heard faint calling voices behind them, like reeds in the mouths of children, crying, "Otan . . . Otan . . . Otan. . . ." He never considered looking back.

Within three days, young men from his extended clan found them and dragged them out of their sleep. The boys were painted red with clay and had great white circles painted around their left eyes. They waved and pointed their spears menacingly at Otan and Isha.

"Come with us now! Come!"

"I would prefer not to," Otan said, sitting down on his bundle of furs. Beside them the river flowed silently through a reedy inlet, and ducks there were followed by their young. "I gave you Home, What else do you want?"

"We want to kill you!" one said joyously. "We will kill you both if you don't come with us!"

"And drag you back like meat!" The other poked at Otan and nicked him with his spearpoint, bringing blood. Otan watched the blood run out of his chest.

"We will go back," he said to Isha. The great weariness that had once been upon him now again descended. He was immensely tired.

They approached Home late at night, yet even at that hour, it was unnaturally quiet. When they reached the foot of the path that had wound through the middle of the village, Otan saw why. The houses had been crumbled and now were only rough heaps of dirt. The trees were uprooted and trampled, and in several places a few people huddled around small campfires, warming themselves and picking at small pieces of meat. Children cried.

One of the warrior boys jabbed Otan in the back to make him walk faster toward the pile of logs that had been his watchtower. In the gloom of the middle of the night, he could see a dark, humped figure crawling up to the top of the log heap, and then he saw the white eye, her ornament, the jewel she wore in her face.

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"Otan!" she screeched. "Otan, my little brother! My little Isha-thief! My little Abo-killer! My little evil Otan! Bring him closer," she ordered. "Otan, The Power does not forget." She flapped her cape of skins and seemed to hover atop the chaos of logs without touching them. "The Power has its revenge."

"The Power has little else."

"The Power wants you, Otan. It tells me that because you are so clever, It wants you with It in the Afterlife. I see the stupid one still lives. Ask the stupid one if we must obey The Power. Ask her, clever Otan."

"No," he said. "I won't ask her."

But Isha was nodding, making no sound.

"I will keep her alive, Otan, because you would hate me more for that." She nodded to her painted boys. "Bring the clever one up here. Tie him."

The two boys giggled and gouged Otan with their spearpoints as they climbed behind him. White Eye fixed the white disk of her eye on him. "The Power now makes you pay for your arrogance."

The boys giggled as they shoved him down at her feet, stretched him out, and tied him to the logs, but they were stupid and gleeful and did not tie him well. Otan lay there and waited until they had descended the log pile and had set it afire. As the blaze burned brighter, the stars overhead faded in the glare.

When he sat up, the front of the pile was ablaze, and White Eye and her boy warriors stood waiting for his death, their faces bright in the flames. Beside them, Isha sat in the dirt, her head bowed, holding her face in her hands. Otan climbed down the back of the pile and circled behind them. He was so tired he could barely make his legs work.

He considered murdering White Eye and taking Isha . . . he could rebuild the village . . . he could see to it that the children were fed and the Old Ones assured that they would not be tortured in the Afterworld for the fun of The Power. . . . But he was exhausted from wrestling with them all these years, and long ago he had lost Isha to White Eye's threats of eternal death and eternal hunger and dark and cold.

He circled and left the growing blaze behind him — not once looking back. He would leave them to their God and their familiar reasons for suffering.

He came to the river, and then walked through the night and morning until the noon sun blazed down on his shoulders. He scared up waterbirds

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and huge waterhorses that thundered out of a marsh and plowed into the river and then floated near the shore with only their eyes and nostrils showing. In the evening he rested, and the next day he walked farther, stopping at a field of dry reeds.

He saw how reeds floated high on the water, so he gathered and bound them in fat bundles together, making a raft. He collected a few handfuls of berries and roots, and then pushed the raft out into the great river that spread like a liquid sky across the land. He climbed onto the raft, and with his hands paddled himself toward the swifter currents in the middle.

That night, lying on his back and listening to the slop and swish of water through the dry reeds, he watched the stars as they turned overhead, and he thought of his life and of Isha and of death, and he thought of his hands and of the thoughts in his head and of the way one thing led to another, like the stars turned and led to the sun, and like the river would lead to another country, to a clean, bright place where the shadows were knife-edged; and if the people there wanted gods, he would give them as many gods as he could dream of. If they wanted ritual, he would invent enough to fill every corner of their lives.

By leading them into blinds of ignorance and filling their lives with preparations for death, perhaps he could keep them from killing each other. He slept as he floated down the great river, through a world where all things led to all things, dreaming of light and death.

COMING NEXT MONTH

December is our SPECIAL STEPHEN KING ISSUE featuring:

- "The Moving Finger," Stephen King's first new story in over a year.
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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 51

First, apologies to all you competition fans for our missing the October issue. After all the anniversary issue stories were shoehorned in, we ran out of room.

In the June issue we asked for the names of famous sf writers concealed in anagrams. We had a medium response in terms of quantity, but this one was hard to judge because the quality was consistent and high. An apt repeat was an anagram for Damon Knight, who suggested this comp: "God, Man, Think!"

We are running low on ideas for future comps and could use some help. We'll send a free sub or a pile of books if we use your idea.

FIRST PRIZE

An Oral Is Hell (Harlan Ellison)
Was Stalin Male? (Stanislaw Lem)
Margerine Rot (George R. R. Martin)
Ye Ol' Jenna (Jane Yolen)
One Lazy Grazer (Roger Zelazny)

— Erika Wilson
Rockville, MD

(Erika, please send us your complete address, and we'll send your prize.)

SECOND PRIZE

Loony Bin Time Snarks (Kim Stanley Robinson)
Jade Manhole (Joe Haldeman)
Havana Candle (Vance Aandahl)
Ponder on A Sun (Poul Anderson)
Braless — Dare I? (Baird Searles)

— Carl Livingston
Burbank, OH

RUNNERS UP

My Limber Amazon Rider (Marion Zimmer Bradley)
Pure, Lush Acids (Lucius Shepard)
A Fart Ends Alone (Alan Dean Foster)
Imp Jeers Jet Art (James Tiptree, Jr.)
Porn Drains Man (Norman Spinrad)

— William J. Meltzer
Arlington, MA

Sun Dream Alley (Samuel R. Delany)
An Old Easter Fan (Alan Dean Foster)
The Green Outdoors (Theodore Sturgeon)
Ire In Novel Heart (Robert A. Heinlein)

— Kathleen Weir
Houston, TX

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Thorn. Pain.? Yes! (Piers Anthony)
Dark Zoo Tent (Dean R. Koontz)
Hear My Yells (Mary Shelley)
A Mad Glass Duo (Douglas Adams)

— Gabriel A. Valentin
New York, NY

Slob, Rinse My Ion Tank (Kim Stanley Robinson)
Fast Noodle, Pal (Olaf Stapleton)
Hot Damn King (Damon Knight)
So Urgent the Rodeo (Theodore Sturgeon)

— Sylvia Troop
Lewisburg, TN

I Flip Up Pi Load (Paul DiFilippo)
The L.A. Tine (Tanith Lee)

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A Solar Hell Inn (Harlan Ellison)
Red Kite (Kit Reed)
— William G. Raley
Mission Viejo, CA

Jet, Jets: A Primer (James Tiptree, Jr.)
To Yammer (Tom Reamy)
Easy Arm Nulled (Samuel R. Delany)
— Pat M. Burns
Hudson, MA

Horny At Spine (Piers Anthony)
Mom, Cockroach Lie! (Michael Moorcock)
A Daft Renal Nose (Alan Dean Foster)
— Mary Lou Fuenzalida
Kenner, LA

COMPETITION 52 (suggested by Stephen Mendenhall)

Some people don't like SF just on principle, so vary an SF title to make it non-SF and appealing to those poor souls. Send us up to a dozen entries, e.g.:

Arthur Clarke's THE SANDS OF MARS, OHIO
Poul Anderson's NEW YORK GIANTS 17 — TAU ZERO

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by November 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 52 will appear in the March Issue.

(Marketplace from page 162)

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(Marketplace continued on page 160)

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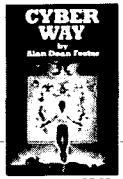

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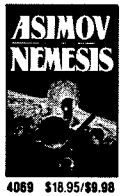

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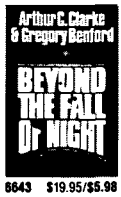

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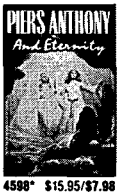

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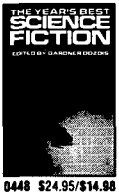

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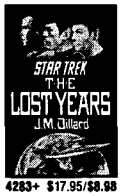

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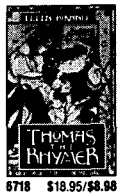

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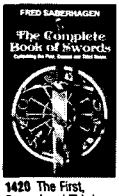

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